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Semper Fi

Reporting by Georgia Swing

Photo by Billy Hardiman



As a U.S. Marine Corps sergeant, Alec Niblett's

missions took him to Iraq, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines. The 27-year-old Tempe resident hopes his current mission, begun this year at Mesa Community College, will take him beyond Earth and

into space.

Niblett's goal is to complete a four-year robotics engineering degree at Arizona State University, and space exploration is a special interest. With a Dutch company aiming to colonize the Red Planet by 2023, he said, "I'll go to Mars — if I can come back."

Niblett, well into his first semester at MCC, celebrated his first Veterans Day there Nov. 8 with an early morning run around campus with other military veterans, followed by a grand opening ceremony for the new Veteran Center for Student Success on the Southern and Dobson campus.

Returning to college would have been "substantially more difficult" without the new Veteran Center's support, he said in an interview.

Facing an October discharge from the Marines after eight years of service, Niblett said he walked into the Veteran Center in August and said: "Hey, I'm a veteran and I need to enroll in classes, and I have no idea what I'm doing."

Staff members responded by helping him fill out paperwork and apply veterans benefits to college expenses.

The brand-new, 1,200-squarefoot office on the lower level at Kirk Student Center offers computers, the resources of experts and a glass-walled lounge where veterans socialize, do homework, have meals and watch TV. There, as part of the center's general Veterans Day observance, Niblett and fellow Marines shared a specially decorated cake to celebrate the Corps' Nov. 10 birthday. One year earlier he was sailing the Pacific as part of a Marine Expedition Unit, providing logistical support and stopping in the Philippines to help train Marines from both countries. He had risen from E-1 to the E-5 rank of sergeant through hard work, study, disciplined behavior and leadership, including a deployment to Iraq from 2008 to 2009.

Being in the military was "kind of the family business," said Niblett, whose grandfathers, father and uncle served and whose younger brother, Blake, is also a Marine veteran.

His father's Navy service took the family from Florida

to North Carolina and Connecticut before a career change brought them to Chandler. At age 11, Niblett's parents enrolled him at Kyrene del Sureño Elementary School.

He described himself as a "skinny, scrawny kid" at Mesa Junior High, and of all his friends who together vowed to join the Marines someday, he's the only one who followed through with that branch of service. To him, the Marines represented a pride sometimes mistaken for arrogance, a reputation as "the biggest and baddest."

Niblett enlisted in the Marines in March 2005 during his senior year at Mesa High and began vigorous physical training and military studies before graduation. The avid reader took to heart the message of Robert A. Heinlein's military science fiction novel "Starship Troopers" – "that you serve the country you're going to take benefits from."

"I'm the kid who never had to study but always got A's," he said of his high school years. A trumpet player, he said his precision marching band experience served him well later in boot camp drills.

In Iraq, Niblett was stationed at Al-Taqaddum Air Base, known simply as "TQ" – a hub of logistical support for military throughout the Anbar region. His job involved "beans, bullets and brass," driving a truck to deliver food, water, fuel and ammunition to troops on and off the base.

Coming from the East Valley of Phoenix, he thought he knew hot weather. But disembarking from the plane in central Iraq in July was like "stepping into an oven," he said. "It was probably 130 degrees."

On his back he wore an 80-pound pack and in his hands were a sea bag and a box of books the size of a microwave oven. Reading, he said, "kept me sane."

As coalition forces prepared to hand over the region to the Iraqi government, the Marines were tasked with "anything they could do to give the populace the warm and fuzzies," Niblett said. He smiled as he recalled handing out fleece blankets, stuffed animals and mattresses in a small fishing community, where the village leader kept the children in line with a walking stick while encouraging them to gather as many gifts as they could. That was typical of the child-rearing he observed in Iraqi villages – communal and firm, he said.

He witnessed from afar the only large-scale attack during his deployment: Insurgents detonated trucks loaded with improvised explosive devices in a crowded market, an attempt to dissuade the populace

from becoming friendly with coalition forces. Before he could lose access to the Internet, Niblett jumped on a computer to make sure his brother, stationed in Ramadi, had not been injured.

Niblett said the largest personal threat at TQ came from a small number of Iraqi nationals among those who worked on the air base who had the secret purpose of kidnapping coalition troops. "I just kept my knife on me," he said. But, he added, "most of the Iraqi nationals were awesome people."

He became friends with an Iraqi man who set up a hookah stand on base each evening and served tea. The man told Niblett: "I actually like the fact you guys are here. It was pretty miserable before that."

He told Niblett that insurgents had killed his brother when he refused to help them.

Far from the scrawny kid who vowed to become a Marine, a muscular, 5-foot, 11-inch Niblett sat in the MCC Veteran Center dressed in a brown vintage Star Wars T-shirt emblazoned with a Storm Trooper. He described the "versatile" role of robotics engineering in manufacturing, research and development, medicine and at NASA, laughing as he remembered the inspiration of his career choice: a YouTube video of a modular robot. He watched a robot take itself apart module by module, then rebuild itself, slither along the floor like a snake and climb an obstacle. "Robotics: Sold!" he told himself.

"I would love to be researching and developing robots for different scenarios. Let me see what materials I can use to make this robot, to shield it for dealing with high-radiation areas or lighten it up so it can easily move between heavy gravity places or light gravity places, to be able to handle multiple kinds of terrain...just to be able to get a problem and solve it in some way, shape or form to make the robot work." He doesn't like being underestimated by those who aren't familiar with the military. "They don't realize that some of us, being the age we are, have been in charge of many people or have management experience," he said.

As a young marching band member in school, he used to volunteer to take part in the Mesa Veterans Day parade, he said, and he's glad people still set aside a day to honor those who have served their country.

Now he lives in the Kiwanis Park area of Tempe, and he told of anonymous donors who have picked up his tab at restaurants when he has been in uniform.

On Nov. 8, MCC President Shouan Pan and other state and college officials took part in the grand opening of the new Veteran Center as well as celebrating Veterans Day.

Dressed in a red Military Student Alliance T-shirt, Niblett and other members of his college club stood at

attention, took photos and helped host the event.

Antonia Adams-Clement, director of educational & special services at MDD, described Niblett as “committed to his academic success. He comes in every day and studies. His mission now is his academic career, and he has his eye on his goal.

And, importantly, he recognizes that the camaraderie he has in that student space and being part of the military student alliance is very important.”

Niblett said he’s grateful for the chance to get together with other veterans who’ve been through the “shared turmoil. We’ve been through that crappy deployment...not having creature comforts. We’ve all earned what we got; we worked for what we got.”

Though he would advise young people to attend college first and join the military as an officer, he said, “the shared suffering of being the lowest level and hazing the nastiness out of my body is a memory I’m going to keep for a while.”



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