

Desert Storm veteran is a natural teacher

By MARCUS RAUHUT, @MarcusRauhutPO

On the first day of class, retired Sgt. 1st Class Ricky Lobo likes to show his students a picture from his drill sergeant days.

It's not so much to intimidate them, but more a thing of pride.

"Being a drill sergeant was the highlight of my military career," Lobo said. "Being able to train young Americans to become soldiers, that's such an honor."

Lobo spent the last 10 years of his military career as an instructor, whether it was training new privates, drill sergeants or non-commissioned officers. With that experience as an instructor, it's no surprise that he now feels at home in a high school classroom.

Earning his wings

Lobo was born and raised in New York City. When he turned 18, his family didn't have money to send him to college.

He had just graduated from high school and was working part time at a supermarket when he saw a commercial for the Army during the Army-Navy football game.

"I called the recruiter because they could pay you to go to college," Lobo said. "The game was on a Saturday, and that Monday, a recruiter was knocking on my door. Within two weeks, I was in the Army."

After basic training at Fort Dix, N.J., he was shipped to Fort McClellan, Ala. for his advanced individual training.

A nuclear/chemical/biological operations specialist, his first duty assignment was a year-long tour in Korea.

When he returned to the U.S., he was initially sent to Fort Irwin, Calif., but he had the option to have his orders changed. One of his options - Fort Campbell, Ky. - stuck out because it was home of the storied 101st Airborne Division.

He got his wish, and says it was an awesome experience earning his wings and completing the different training maneuvers with the 101st. The training culminated in a 12-mile march in full gear, which Lobo finished in two hours.

In the 'sand box'

In August 1990, Iraqi forces led by Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Toward the end of August, it was evident that the 101st Airborne would be deployed to help coalition forces in the Middle East.

Lobo was promoted Sept. 1 from specialist to sergeant, and on Sept. 10, he was deployed.

His platoon was stationed outside King Fahd Air Base, Saudi Arabia, in a city made up of bedouin tents.

"There was no air conditioning, nothing of that nature. It was very hot - 115 in the shade. You drank a lot of water," Lobo said. "We were there waiting for the rest of the divisions to join us, which eventually they did. Your life was every day doing training."

Lobo was part of a decontamination unit, whose primary mission was to decontaminate in the event of a nuclear, biological or chemical attack and train other units what to do.

His unit also had to set up showers in the "sand box" for the entire brigade.

"You're away from your family and friends. Back then there was no Internet or cell phones, texting or Skype; no such luxuries. We received letters through snail mail and packages from loved ones," Lobo said. "Being away from home was difficult. My first born child was born while I was over there. "It sucked, but you get used to it. You're there doing your mission. You're there for a reason."

That reason became more clear one evening in January 1991.

He and other soldiers in the camp heard jets flying over - one after another, taking off from King Fahd Air Base.

They turned on the Armed Forces radio network, where they heard a recording from President George Bush announcing the launch of Operation Desert Storm.

"From that day forward, it was the most harrowing experience that any one could ask for," Lobo said.

Lobo recalls watching planes fly overhead from the bunker and explosions shaking the ground. There was a constant fear that biological weapons would be used.

Ground combat operations lasted only 100 hours, and the mission ended without Lobo's unit having to engage the enemy.

Finding his calling

After his deployment to Iraq, he spent several years stationed in Germany, Fort Hood, and Korea.

In 1998, he was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., to begin what he called the "apex" of his career.

He was assigned to be an instructor at the U.S. Army Chemical School, a state-of-the art training facility where they actually worked with live nerve agents and live blister agents.

Around February or March 2000, he received a puzzling telegram: It ordered him to report in July to Fort Leonard Wood, where he was already stationed.

It turned out the Army selected him to attend the U.S. Army Drill sergeant academy there.

"Ask any soldier, and they would love to be a drill sergeant. They are the ultimate role model for soldiers," Lobo said. "It was an honor. It was the ultimate honor."

But in order to become a drill sergeant, first you have to go through training.

It was like basic training all over again.

"When you go to drill sergeant school, it's like being a brat in the Army. Everything that a private does in basic training, we did, plus the classroom training. It was very challenging, very demanding."

For two years, he served as a drill sergeant.

"This is where I found my calling. That was the highlight of my military career. I got to mentor high school students and young adults that came into the Army to serve their country."

A typical day started with waking up at 3:30 or 4:30 a.m. so that he could be at work by 5 a.m. and wake up the recruits at 5:30. After a day of training, it was lights out for the privates at 9 p.m.

He enjoyed his work, but still had some concerns about how drill sergeants were being trained, so he inquired about what it would take to be a drill sergeant leader.

After a lengthy interview process, he was selected to become a drill sergeant leader.

But first, there was more training.

"It was like going through basic training three times, but it's OK. When you graduate, you get a certificate to be a drill sergeant leader. That was an honor, and it was an awesome experience."

Lobo spent 18 months as a drill sergeant leader before he was sent back to Germany.

This was supposed to be just a stop on the way to Iraq, but when he arrived in Frankfurt, his plans were changed.

Two first sergeants were screening the non-commissioned officers, and when they saw that Lobo was not only a drill sergeant, but a drill sergeant leader, they got on the phone right away with their superiors.

Just like that, Lobo's orders were changed, and instead of shipping out to Iraq, he was reassigned as an instructor at the non-commissioned officer academy in Germany.

From combat to classroom

Even though he made a career out of the military, Lobo initially joined the Army to pay for college, so after retirement, he took advantage of the GI Bill and went back to school, where he studied to become a teacher.

"I never wanted to be a teacher. I didn't plan to be a teacher, but I was an instructor for the chemical school, a drill sergeant, a drill sergeant leader, NCO academy senior instructor. The last 10 years of my military years I was an instructor in some way, shape or form. That got me interested in

teaching."

In 2009, he and his wife - who is still active duty Army - were sent to Pennsylvania. She works as an Army dentist at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle.

He has been looking for a teaching job and recently has been serving as a long-term substitute at Chambersburg Area Senior High School.

His passion is working with high school students and young adults.

"I have bonded with my students. They probably say I'm crazy, but that's how I am," Lobo said.

"They say I'm loud. I probably got louder because of the military."

There are other ways his military experience has shaped his teaching.

"A lot of my military type of teaching I have incorporated in the classroom and used to my advantage. I think it helps," Lobo said. "I'm here for my students. I try to be good to them and show them there is a world out there after high school and they have to be prepared for it."

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