

Words like strength, courage, and determination describe Robert Riddle's final semester at DBU. In pursuing his life-long dream, many obstacles stood in his way, not the least of which was a tour of duty in Iraq.

Robert's dream of graduating from college began right after high school. Convinced that educational benefits from military service were his best opportunity to finance a college education, he joined the U.S. Navy. During his six years of service, he was stationed at various places, including the South Pole. When his tour of duty ended, Robert enrolled at Tarrant County College to pursue his dream.

Two years of balancing a full-time job, a full course load in college, and a newly discovered social life brought Robert to the point of burn out. He decided to take a semester off but did not return to TCC until six years later. What Robert refers to as his "very long semester," was also when he met his wife, Wendi, and started a family.

Robert transferred to DBU in the spring of 2002 to complete his undergraduate studies. He also found the chance to fulfill another dream—and supplement his weekend drills with the National Guard—by being a student athlete on the DBU soccer team. But his desire to spend more time with his wife and children convinced Robert to forgo the opportunity to join the soccer team and take another semester break before graduating. Shortly after this decision, Riddle's National Guard unit was activated for service in Iraq.

Though he did not look forward to being separated from his family, Robert recognized an opportunity to continue his education through online classes at DBU. In a letter to DBU he wrote, "While I might be in a combat zone over 7,000 miles from home, I have faith that I will be able to complete these last classes with excellent marks. I believe God has separated me from my wife and four kids for more than one reason; I'm sure that this is one of them."

Thousands of miles from the Dallas campus, Robert began to complete his final courses. He continued to believe in his dream, and the realization of being the first in his family to receive a bachelor's degree propelled him through some difficult times.

"Excuses for late papers like, 'The dog ate my homework,' have been replaced by, 'The printer is not working' or 'My hard drive crashed,'" explained

Dr. David Arnott, one of Robert's professors at DBU. But those excuses from other students did not prepare him for an e-mail from Robert in September 2005, a month his unit suffered heavy losses.

"Sir, sorry for the delay," the e-mail read. "I had to go on a mission to Fallujah and Baghdad, and then we had a communications blackout due to a soldier's death. Anytime we have someone die here, they disable all communications to the outside world until the soldier's family is notified. Anyway, I'll be turning in more stuff soon. Thanks for your patience."

The soldier who died was Sergeant Sean "Brady" Berry, also a former DBU student and soccer player. He and Riddle served in the same National Guard unit, became good friends, and worked together distributing soccer balls to Iraqi children and setting up soccer fields and goals, a ministry which Brady had begun and Robert gladly joined.

In late fall of 2005, Robert returned to the States as a war-weary soldier ready to see his family and receive his degree. When thinking about these many months of service and classwork, Robert turns to his wife, Wendi, who sacrificed so much to make his dream possible. If you ask him, he would insist that her name should be on the diploma as well.

As Commencement day arrived, people from literally around the world gathered to see their child or spouse walk across the stage to complete their dream. And there was Robert's family, the strength behind the soldier, sitting in the midst of the crowd, his four children craning their necks to see their daddy. During a moving part of the service, DBU President Gary Cook asked Robert to come forward and lead the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance. Standing in honor of the flag and the soldier who fought to protect the flag, the crowd united in claiming the nation to be "under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Robert is now at home, enjoying the ability to see his family every day and excited to be a college graduate. "Since DBU's mascot is the Patriot," explains Robert, "you might say I am two times a Patriot."

Two Times



Photo courtesy Flash Photography

(Left) DBU President Gary Cook congratulates Robert Riddle upon the completion of his degree and thanks him for his service to our country. (Below) Robert celebrates the special day along with his wife, Wendi, and their children (left to right) Jessica, Danielle, Tyler, and Austin.



a Patriot

Soldier Receives Degree and a Hero's Welcome

BY JUDY ABERCROMBIE