



THE SATISFACTION OF SERVICE

STUDENTS AND ALUMNI EXPERIENCE THE OPPORTUNITIES AND REWARDS OF MILITARY DENTISTRY

OPPOSITE: Some of the 58 students who are currently pursuing their dental degrees as commissioned officers in the U.S. military. Of this group, 17 are in the Air Force, 15 in the Army, and 26 in the Navy and 12 are first-year students, 15 are second-year students, 16 are third-year students, and 15 are fourth-year students.

IN ANY GIVEN YEAR, a significant number of Penn Dental Medicine students — presently 58 in the current academic year, or nearly 10 percent of the School's DMD candidates — pursue dental degrees as commissioned officers in the U.S. military. These students attend Penn Dental Medicine on Army, Navy, and Air Force scholarships, and, after graduation, “pay back” one year of military dental practice for each year of their scholarships, with a minimum of three years of service required. In return, most receive full funding for tuition, fees, books, and supplies, as well as health insurance and a monthly living stipend.

Of the Penn Dental Medicine students receiving military scholarships this academic year, 17 are in the Air Force, 15 in the Army, and 26 in the Navy. Nine 2019 graduates recently began payback assignments in locations around the country, from North Carolina and Virginia to Colorado and Washington State. Most of these alumni will complete some form of advanced or specialty dental training at the military's expense. Some will choose to stay and make their life's work in the military, joining generations of Penn Dental Medicine alumni who have pursued fulfilling and varied careers in military dentistry.

“The military offers our graduates many valuable benefits, including education, the opportunity to experience different cultures throughout the world, and of course, the privilege of serving our country,” says Sue Schwartz, Director of Career Services at Penn Dental Medicine.



WHY MILITARY DENTISTRY?

While some students apply for military dental scholarships in college, others make the decision after arriving at dental school. Students choose to undergo the rigorous, competitive application process for many reasons.

“Both my parents were in the Army, and my brother is in the Army Reserves,” says Nicolette Young (D’20), who learned about scholarship opportunities from an Army recruiter in college. “When I heard about the scholarship program, it was a no-brainer to be able to serve like the rest of my family — and to have the opportunity to attend dental school without the stress of loans and debt.”

Gabi Im (D’20) applied for an Air Force scholarship during her first year of dental school. “My main motivation was to offset costs and relieve my parents’ worries about student debt,” says Gabi, who is pursuing a dual degree in dentistry and Public Health. “But in addition to financial security, I will graduate with a purpose: making sure our airmen are healthy and ready to serve our country.”

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— SUE SCHWARTZ

Joshua Cho (D’20), who applied for his Navy scholarship while a college student, has always loved learning about other cultures, and knew that being a dentist in the Navy could provide him with a window to the world. “Traveling, and making a sincere attempt at understanding what makes people different, can help me appreciate the complexity of the world rather than be afraid of it,” he says.

The ability to draw on the Air Force’s resources, including research, materials, and technology, appealed to Soren Christensen (D’20), who attended the Air Force Academy before dental school. “As military dentists, we can provide the very best dental care without restraint from private insurance and other financial restrictions,” he says.

Soren founded the Military Dentistry Club at Penn Dental Medicine to help students network and prepare for active duty after graduation. “It’s been great to have a space to support each other and share information,” he says.

MILITARY DENTISTRY

While some Penn Dental Medicine students complete their payback service and return to civilian life, others choose the many opportunities of a military career, from specialty training and travel to a sense of camaraderie and the satisfaction of service. Here, we profile four Penn Dental Medicine alumni and their experiences in the U.S. military.



DR. THOMAS R. SCHNEID (D'79)

*Executive Dean, Postgraduate Dental College
Uniformed Services University of
the Health Sciences, San Antonio, Texas*

After a distinguished 30-year career as a military dentist and educator that included time in both the Navy and the Air Force, consultancies with the Air Force Surgeon General, numerous high-profile academic appointments, and extensive publishing and lecturing in his field, retired Air Force dentist Dr. Thomas Schneid (D'79), now provides academic oversight to all postgraduate dental education for the Army, Navy, and Air Force Postgraduate Dental Schools as Executive Dean of the Uniformed University of the Health Sciences (USU). (In this position, which he assumed in 2015, he collaborates with fellow alumni Colonel Jay Graver and Captain Sean Meehan, deans of the Air Force and Navy postgraduate dental programs, who are also profiled in this article.) The USU serves up to 180 students a year in 20 dental residency programs, all of which award M.S. degrees from the University as well as specialty certificates from the military.

"Our mission is to ensure the dental health readiness of our military patients so that they can do their jobs and serve our country," he says.

A PRACTICAL PATH TO DENTAL SCHOOL

When he enrolled at Penn Dental Medicine in 1975 after graduating from Princeton University, Dr. Schneid applied for a Navy scholarship and was turned down. "It was an exhaustive, rigorous process," he remembers, "and I went through it twice. I was persistent." The second time he applied, in 1976, he was accepted.

His motives for joining the military were practical: "My parents had sacrificed a lot to pay for my undergraduate education, and I needed some financial help to pay for dental school. It was mainly about the money and getting started on a career."

He became involved in Penn's Navy Reserve Club, which met once a month. "It kept our enthusiasm going and removed some of the uncertainties we all felt," he remembers.

After serving his three payback years as a Navy dentist, Dr. Schneid left the military to enter private practice. He re-entered the military, joining the Air Force in 1986, to take advantage of further educational opportunities, eventually completing a residency in prosthodontics and a fellowship in maxillofacial prosthetics. Prior to his retirement from the Air Force in 2013, Dr. Schneid served as the founding Dean of the Air Force Postgraduate Dental School.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Dr. Schneid sees many benefits to military dentistry as a career — not only education, research, and travel, but also global collaboration with top military dentists, and the ability to practice dentistry without the distractions of running a business.

He also acknowledges the career's challenges: the degree of conformity required, the need to move frequently, and the possibility of being deployed. However, he adds, "these things can also be seen as rewards, depending on your viewpoint and your personality."

He encourages students to give the military path a try. "If you can reduce or eliminate school debt, do it. Serve one tour in the military and see if it's right for you and your family," advises Dr. Schneid, who with his wife of 43 years, Cindy, raised two sons, Michael and Greg.

In his current role, Dr. Schneid focuses on creating master clinicians who are well-versed in dental research, scientific literature, and critical thinking. His priorities for the coming years include refining comprehensive research and faculty development opportunities, as well as expanding collaboration with other health sciences universities.

His deanship has reinforced his respect for dentists in all three branches of the military. "They are among the finest people, with the highest level of integrity, that I have ever met," he says.



COLONEL JAY GRAVER (D'86)

*Dean, U.S. Air Force Postgraduate
Dental School
San Antonio, Texas*

With a father who was a dentist and a faculty member at Penn Dental Medicine, and a mother who was a dental hygienist, dentistry seemed a natural career path for Colonel Graver. His journey has led him from private practice through 27 years as an Air Force dentist, leader, and educator to his current positions as Dean of the Air Force Postgraduate Dental School and the Air Force Surgeon General's Consultant for Graduate Dental and Continuing Education.

Since taking on the role in 2017, Colonel Graver has been responsible for the executive leadership and strategic direction of the Air Force's eight dental residency programs, two fellowships, and ten one-year Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) programs across the country. He currently oversees a faculty of 100, and in his previous assignment directed dental operations at 76 Air Force dental treatment facilities worldwide.

FROM PRIVATE PRACTICE TO THE MILITARY

Because his father and fellow alumnus, Dr. Heber Graver (D'56, GR'72), taught at Penn Dental Medicine from 1973–1997, Colonel Graver became familiar with the University of Pennsylvania as a teen. He came to Penn as an undergraduate (C'82) biology major in 1978 and stayed on to become a dental student. (He married his wife, Susan in 1985 while still a student. They have four children: Hunter, Elizabeth, Tyler, and Ethan).

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— COLONEL JAY GRAVER (D'86)

After a few years in private practice, Colonel Graver decided to specialize in prosthodontics and felt that the Air Force offered him the best education and career opportunities. He was commissioned in 1992 and served tours of duty as far away as Portugal, attaining numerous dental leadership positions in Texas and Washington D.C. In 2001, he completed both an M.S. in prosthodontics at the University of Texas and a prosthodontic residency at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

It was a big change: “I started out in a tiny private practice, with one dentist and one assistant. Lackland has over 100 dentists,” he says. “Collaborating with so many talented colleagues was and continues to be an invaluable learning opportunity.”

Like all military dentists, Colonel Graver built skills outside the scope of civilian dentistry, including treating war-related wounds, which requires a thorough understanding of fluid control, blood loss control, tissue injury management and infections. Military dentists must also provide durable, appropriate dental solutions that hold up in extreme environments. “Our job is to provide dental care for war fighters,” he says. “How do we give these men and women the care they need to fight for our country?”

Answering that question is at the heart of Colonel Graver's deanship, in which he works to ensure that the Air Force's dental education is aligned with its military mission.

IMPROVING THE MISSION

Colonel Graver's experience in military dentistry has brought countless rewards. “It's been a unique and diverse career in which I've been able to work closely with others to solve problems and improve our mission,” he says.

He recommends the military path to any dental student or dentist who is interested. “It's a great opportunity to serve while honing the skills to reach your full potential as a dentist,” he says.

“You can serve your tour and leave the military if you choose. Or you can stay and be part of a great team.”

SERVING VETERANS

Penn Dental Medicine continues to reach out to Veterans in the community through its annual New Patient Admissions Fair for Veterans. Launched last year, it provides a day of free dental and oral cancer screenings, free x-rays, and assistance in follow-up care. This year's Fair is November 12. For ongoing care within the School's clinics, Veterans receive an initial 20% discount followed with a sliding scale fee schedule.



CAPTAIN SEAN MEEHAN (D'92)
Dean, Naval Postgraduate Dental School
Bethesda, Maryland

Five years out of Penn Dental Medicine, Captain Sean Meehan (D'92) had already accomplished a great deal. He had completed a general practice residency and was a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), a uniformed service corps overseen by the Surgeon General of the United States. He left the USPHS for a teaching position at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, where he was selected as “Teacher of the Year.” Despite his achievements, however, Captain Meehan was looking for something more.

“I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself,” he says. “I was looking for a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose.” He found all of those things in the Navy.

As a Naval officer, Captain Meehan traveled across the country, to Europe, and to the Far East, providing dental care to members of the Navy and Marine Corps. In 2002, he began a distinguished career in academia that led him to the Naval Postgraduate Dental School (NPDS), where he was appointed full professor at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in 2010. He was named Dean of NPDS in 2016.

A LEADER IN DENTAL EDUCATION

As Dean, Captain Meehan oversees the schools eight residency programs. “We take general dentists and make them specialists,” he says.

As his four-year tenure approaches its final year, he is especially proud of the school’s most recent reaccreditation visit from the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), which resulted in zero reporting requirements, and of NPDS’ participation, through Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, in the Joint Commission Accreditation Survey, a rare accomplishment for a dental school. The Joint Commission promotes patient safety and quality of care. NPDS has also made many technological advances: a full upgrade to digital radiography and digital dentistry, including dental applications for 3-D printers, and a total dental instrument replacement.

BACK TO HIS ALMA MATER

Last fall, Captain Meehan (who, with his wife, Angie, has two children, Sean and Emma) was asked to speak to Penn Dental Medicine’s Military Dentistry Club about his career. After a school tour, he met with members at an informal lunchtime seminar. He enjoyed the experience so much that he accepted an invitation to be part of Penn Dental Medicine’s 2019 commencement ceremony. Following the commencement, he led a recommissioning ceremony for military graduates, who reaffirmed their oaths.

Afterwards, Captain Meehan spoke with students and their parents, who were excited and nervous about active duty. “They were very curious and wanted advice,” he says. “They had a lot of questions about specialty training and about duty assignments.”

Returning to the place where his dental education began to talk with students and graduates about their own careers is an experience Captain Meehan treasures: “It is fulfilling to connect with these promising young dentists as they plan for their futures.”



DR. MARY BETH SORRENTINO (D’11)

Tidewater Endodontics
Virginia Beach, VA

Today, Dr. Mary Beth Sorrentino (D’11) is a private practice endodontist, but she launched her career as a military dentist, accepting an Air Force scholarship in her first year at Penn Dental Medicine.

“Initially, I never thought of myself enjoying the military,” she says. “But I realized that I could take advantage of some really cool educational opportunities without going into a massive amount of debt, and use the skills I gained to serve my country.”

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“Taking the military path was the best personal and professional decision I have ever made.”

— DR. MARY BETH SORRENTINO (D’11)

INTENSIVE TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Sorrentino’s three-year scholarship covered tuition, fees, books, and supplies at Penn Dental Medicine, enabling her to attend dental school without financial concerns. Upon graduation in 2011, she became a Captain in the Air Force Dental Corps and reported to Montgomery, Alabama for six weeks of commissioned officer training. There she received an intensive military

initiation, complete with physical conditioning, and learned the proper way to wear her uniform, salute, and march.

“It was a little terrifying, but also very exciting,” she remembers. “I was expected to be an airman first and a dentist second.”

After reporting for active duty, Dr. Sorrentino completed a one-year Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) residency at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

While caring for veterans and active duty personnel, she learned advanced skills like IV sedation and complex surgery, and was trained as a forensic dentist, with the ability to identify human remains using dental records. She also cared for military working dogs; performing root canals on these important members of the military helped her develop an interest in endodontics.

Her AEDG residency complete, Dr. Sorrentino was assigned to Joint Base Charleston in South Carolina, a small base with no specialists, where she completed her three-year payback assignment, handling everything from oral surgery to orthodontics.

SETTING DOWN ROOTS

While on active duty, Dr. Sorrentino met Justin Whitford, a security forces officer who is now her husband. Together, the couple decided to return to civilian life.

“I’m a homebody, and I was ready to set down roots,” says Dr. Sorrentino, who completed a civilian endodontics residency and now practices in her hometown of Virginia Beach. She enjoys showing patients that a root canal doesn’t have to be a bad experience.

“I love being able to save people’s teeth and take away their pain,” she says.

Dr. Sorrentino remains grateful for the excellent training and experience she received in the Air Force.

“Taking the military path was the best personal and professional decision I have ever made,” she says. “The opportunity to serve my country is something I will always value.” ■

— By Juliana Delany