UC SANTA BARBARA
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Challenge Met

Nicknames in the military are as common as complaints about the food. Ask Robert Vargas. “They call me ‘grandpa’ and ‘dad,’ ” he said. “I love it, though. It’s pretty awesome.”

At the ancient age of 30, Vargas is about to graduate from UC Santa Barbara with a bachelor’s degree in biological sciences and, crucially, he’ll enter the Army on active duty as a second lieutenant in the infantry. It’s the culmination of a years-long journey for the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadet in the university’s Surfrider Battalion.

Vargas, who is from Sylmar in the San Fernando Valley, went from working-class guy with no interest in college to community college student to enlisted Army reservist to ROTC cadet. It was an evolution that at times tested his resolve, but he stuck it out to become a model student and officer.

“If you look at how he came into ROTC and how he came out he’s not the same guy,” said Lt. Col. Travis Rayfield, professor and chair of UCSB’s Department of Military Science.

You’ll get no argument from Vargas. College wasn’t even a consideration when he graduated high school in 2004. Instead, he worked in his family’s construction supply business. And then one day he ran into a cousin who’d become a physician.

“He said, ‘Hey, you’re pretty smart. You should try to go back to school.’ ” Vargas recalled. “And I was, ‘I’ll give it a shot.’ And I did. I did really well at community

college.”

Before enrolling at UCSB, he joined the Army Reserves at 28 and completed boot camp and advanced infantry training (AIT). “I literally graduated from AIT two weeks before school started,” he said. “I flew back home, moved all my stuff and then school started. I was culture shocked.”

That might be a bit of an understatement. Vargas had just completed months of extremely rigorous training in how to be an enlisted man. It can feel like another world, a closed ecosystem of stress, exhaustion and, ultimately, transformation into a soldier. Now here he was on the beach, surrounded by skateboarding college students and ROTC cadets being trained to give orders after he’d just learned to follow them.

“I had a really rough time when I got here because I was so into the training, being enlisted, and I just had a horrific time transitioning from training in the Army to being here,” he said.

His first year at UCSB was nearly a disaster. A year’s layoff from college left him academically rusty. He failed some upper division courses in his first quarter. “Toward the end of the quarter I just stopped going to class and didn’t even show up for the finals. I was in a really bad place.”

Even worse, he was having a hard time fitting in with his fellow cadets. “It was so different the way ROTC is run from the way enlisted Army is, especially training. I was just having a real rough time and I wasn’t getting along with anybody. I was being self-destructive. I was just like, ‘Ah, this is not for me. I want to go back to the Army.’ ”

After that first quarter he went home and talked things over with his family and did a lot of soul-searching. He also found an ally and mentor in Rayfield, a West Point graduate who has served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Col. Rayfield really helped me,” Vargas said. “He was really patient with me and gave me a lot of time. Eventually I transitioned and got along with everyone and I’m doing really well in the program.”

After graduation he’ll go to Fort Benning, Ga., for the Basic Officer Leaders Course and Ranger School. He hopes to be a platoon leader with the 82nd Airborne.

“I’ll be in Georgia for about a year,” he said. “Ranger School, Airborne, everything is in Georgia. Very intense. I’m going to lose about 30, 40 pounds, and I’m going to age about five years. But it should be interesting, and it should be fun. I’m looking forward to it.”

Vargas will be one of eight cadets of the Surfrider Battalion who will receive their second lieutenant bars Friday, June 16, at 2 p.m. in a commissioning ceremony at Goleta Beach Park.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.