UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

March 11, 2019
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A Taste of the High Life

Flying south about a thousand feet above Montecito, the Army Blackhawk helicopter lurched hard toward the Pacific Ocean on the right, dove and made a stomach-churning U-turn. It was an aerial rollercoaster, the sort of move that can separate aviators from the happily grounded.

And that, in large measure, was the point, said Lt. Col. Travis Buehner, professor and chair of UC Santa Barbara's Department of Military Science. Aside from a few civilians, the chopper's passengers were cadets from the campus's Surfrider Battalion of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which provides leadership training to future officers in the regular Army, Army Reserves and Army National Guard.

The flights from Santa Barbara Airport were part of the battalion's Aviation Day, which gave the cadets a chance to experience the high life courtesy of the Army's 1-140th Aviation Regiment based out of Fresno.

"What we're trying to do is expose them to as many of those opportunities as possible, and this is one great opportunity," said Buehner, whose usual assignment is flying Blackhawks.

He explained that when the cadets graduate and are commissioned as second lieutenants, they're assigned to a "branch" — field artillery, infantry, aviation, etc. The top 10 percent of cadets generally get to pick their preferred branch. The rest are assigned a branch based on a number of factors.

They can also opt to serve in the Army National Guard or Army Reserve. For cadets who want go into aviation — one of the most sought-after branches — the Guard is a good bet, Buehner said, as aviation officers are in high demand in California.

Capt. Jason Boatwright, a recruiter with the Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion, who also serves with the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, was on hand to pitch the Guard to the cadets, many of whom are undecided on a career path once they become officers. With the flights, he said, "We can expose them to some of the other branches. A lot of them don't realize all their options as they get ready to enter the service."

The flight gave cadet Maya Davis, a first-year kinesiology major, plenty to think about. For a time she was "fixated" on being a combat medic, she said, but the Blackhawk ride made her expand her options as she looks ahead.

"I have a lot of time to figure that out," Davis said. "I'm either going medical or aviation. I wasn't going to come today, but I made sure I was here to be able to experience this, be able to learn a little bit more.

"I think it's a great opportunity for all of us," she added, "because there's a lot of people who don't know what they want to do; even some of the [third-years] don't know. So it gives us the exposure we need to figure out what we want to do."

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.