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## Between Two Worlds

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# Between Two Worlds

While embracing their new lives as students, two veterans find their past service in Iraq and Afghanistan informs their IWU experience in subtle and surprising ways.

Stories by **KIM HILL**

Photos by **ROBERT FRANK III '14**

In the bad dreams, Megan Schumacher '18 is back at Camp Leatherneck in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province, where American and British troops battled Taliban insurgents. In the good dreams, she's a registered nurse, confidently caring for her patients.

Right now, Schumacher stands between both those worlds. A U.S. Navy veteran who served five years of active duty, including a tour of Afghanistan, she's also a second-year student in Illinois Wesleyan's School of Nursing.

Veterans who served full-time on active duty are rare at IWU: Schumacher and U.S. Army veteran Tim Leiser '16 are thought to be the only two currently enrolled. Both say that the personal attention they received from faculty and staff waived any reservations that might have about attending a college with no formal veteran's affairs services.

Meeting for the first time this fall, it was clear that the two veteran-students felt an immediate bond. "How long have you been on base?" Schumacher asked Leiser, motioning to the autumn-gold Eckley Quadrangle, then chuckled as she realized her mistake. It's just one of the many ways that their military

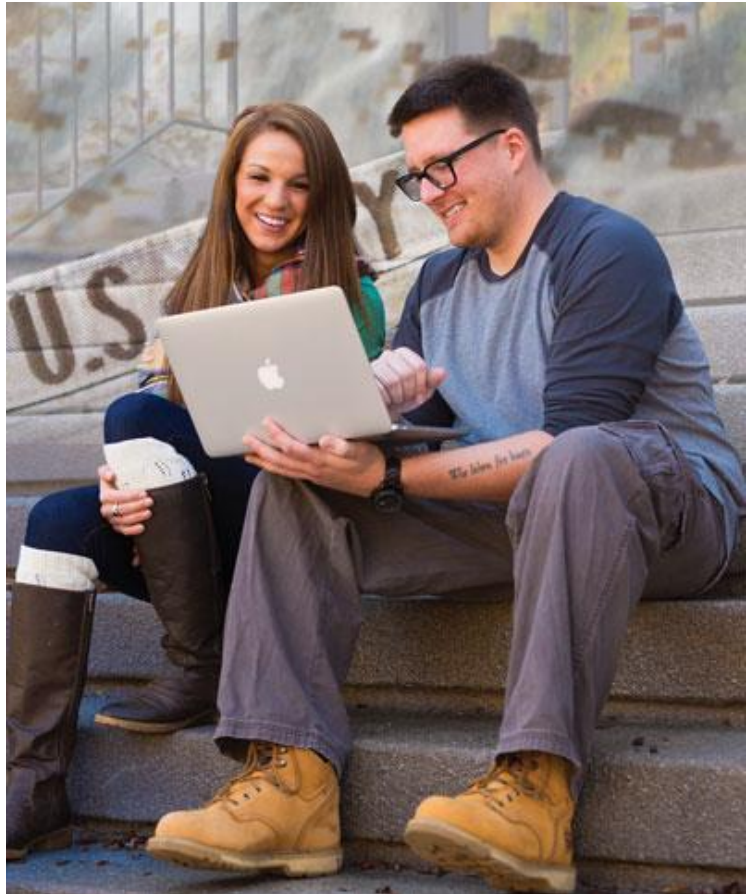
service intersects with their lives as IWU students, taking them down new paths of self-discovery.

## Going the Distance

Megan Schumacher's story of why she joined the military has such a familiar ring it is almost a cliché. A wide-eyed high schooler wants to get out of her small town (Sigel, Ill. – population 386) to travel the world. Working at the local IGA grocery store, she struggles to pay tuition at the community college where she's enrolled. The military becomes a viable option to achieve the dual goals of adventure and education.

"I just went down to the [U.S. Navy] recruiter's office one day, and I ended up signing the papers without telling my parents," she recalls. "They weren't very happy about it, but I knew what I wanted to do, and I felt like that was the right direction for me."

Schumacher had long been interested in the healthcare field. After boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes near North Chicago, she completed training as a hospital corpsman, which is an enlisted medical specialist of the



Megan Schumacher and Tim Leiser swap stories of their military experiences on the steps of Buck Memorial Library. Serving in the Navy and Army, respectively, the two are transitioning into their new lives as IWU students.

U.S. Navy who serves with both the Navy and the Marine Corps. The colloquial term for a Marine to address a hospital corpsman is “Doc.”

After graduating from field medical training, Schumacher was stationed at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Her seven-month deployment to Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan began in July 2013. There she saw firsthand the effects of war: on her friends, the soldiers she tended, the tribal Afghans who lived in the desert province, and on herself. Schumacher won't talk much about those long, brutally hot days at Camp Leatherneck, except to say she'd go back tomorrow if called to do so. It's where she realized she wanted to become a nurse. It's also where she decided the best course of action would be to leave the military when her service was up — and return to college to become a nurse, with the ultimate goal of taking care of other veterans. Illinois Wesleyan's participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program, which funds tuition and fees above the Post-9/11 GI Bill, takes care of her fees.



As a medical specialist who served with both the Navy and Marine Corps, Schumacher was deployed to Afghanistan. She is now enrolled in IWU's School of Nursing.

Discharged in August 2014, Schumacher chose Illinois Wesleyan's nursing program based on its excellent reputation — even though she was a little scared about her ability to handle its rigorous curriculum. She wondered if a school with more resources devoted specifically to veterans might be a better fit. She also felt self-conscious about the age gap between her and her classmates (she is now 25 years old).

In the end, however, her direct admission to the School of Nursing and its faculty's warm reception trumped her concerns. Soon after she applied, School of Nursing Director Vickie Folse '86 invited her to visit campus. “We talked about everything, whether it would be better for me to do a year at community college and then transfer in, because it had been so long since I'd been in school,” says Schumacher. “I told her I wanted to start fresh. I felt I was starting at the beginning [of the curriculum], just like everyone else, even though I had medical experience.

“This has been the best decision I've ever made,” she adds. “The faculty here are amazing and they spend so much time with me and really care about me.”

That caring has extended far beyond one-on-one tutoring in the digestive system or large muscle groups. For example, her anatomy instructor, Associate Professor of Biology Will

Jaackle, helped her determine how she best processed and retained information, and also advised her that she needed to extend herself a bit more to make friends.

“It took me a long time to have conversations with people,” admits Schumacher, who says very few students know about her military service or even how old she is. Large groups of people and loud noises can still be hard to deal with.

She would like to see Americans, regardless of their politics, be a bit more grateful for what they have and what troops go through, and to not take things for granted — little things like a flush toilet or a hot shower; big things like independence and free expression.

She doesn't often talk about these things, however. She's quiet, especially in groups, although she laughs easily in one-in-one conversation. A self-described “average” student in high school, Schumacher said her initial goal was just to get through. Now, the goal is to improve her grades each semester, while still working part time as an emergency room technician at Advocate BroMenn Medical Center.

And on the days when it all seems too much — studying for tests, a shift at the hospital, flashbacks to Afghanistan — she remembers how far she's come.

“The transition has been hard, but I think this has been one of the best things for me,” Schumacher said of her decision to attend IWU. “I thought I was a hard worker, but I've been pushed here beyond what I thought was possible. I've also made some amazing friends. I know I made the right decision.”

## A Change of Focus

It's taken him eight years, including two tours of Iraq and one in Afghanistan, but Tim Leiser '16 is finally a student at Illinois Wesleyan.

A native of the Chicago suburb of Mundelein, Leiser first applied to the University while he was still in high school. He was not admitted, so he started college at Augustana College before running out of money after his first year. His parents had told him paying for college was his responsibility; student loans were not an option for him. So he moved back to the Chicagoland area, angry and depressed at what seemed the end to his college career. He took a job driving a delivery truck but quickly determined living paycheck to paycheck was not really living.

The idea to join the military may have originated in the long line of servicemen in Leiser's family. He said he may have even decided to talk to a recruiter out of spite for an offhand remark his father made as Leiser left to college. Nevertheless, with the economy tanking in 2008 and feeling he lacked other options, Leiser made the rounds of recruiting offices, eventually signing with the U.S. Army.

Leiser completed several trainings: Air Assault School, Airborne, Mountain Warfare, PATHFINDER — culminating in U.S. Army Ranger School. The two-month combat leadership course is intense. Of the 330 soldiers who began with him, only 110 — including Leiser — graduated as Rangers. He was not among the top one percent of graduates selected for Elite Special Operations School; instead, Leiser went to Iraq for a nine-month deployment. After six months back in the States, he returned to Iraq again, this time for nearly a year. A six-month deployment in Afghanistan followed in 2012-13. At a forward operating base with Internet access near the end of his service, Leiser again applied to IWU and was quickly accepted. He thinks his military service made the difference this time around.



Now age 27 and an IWU student, Leiser talks about his experiences when asked by professors to speak to their classes. Students ask him if Iraq is like what was depicted in Hollywood films such as *Jarhead* or *The Hurt Locker*. Leiser understands people can only ask questions from their frame of reference, but wishes they could know about his unit's successes — even those that didn't appear on any commander's plan, like the Iraqi dishwasher who'd cut his hand badly and walked 20 miles to a doctor, only to be told the hand should be amputated.

Leiser's unit arrived in the village and learned of the man's situation. Because everyone in his unit received medical training due to the high level of danger they faced, Leiser was able to clean and stitch the man's cut and administer antibiotics. Three weeks later, the dishwasher was back at work. “The man gave me the only real possession he had, a part of a donkey shoe, that I wore on my Kevlar every day,” Leiser recalls. “It felt like we had a purpose there, that we were really helping people, and saving people from the horrible disease that was the Taliban.”

Some of his professors share his military background, and Leiser is thankful for the understanding he's received from them, including longtime adjunct instructor Ron Emmons, whose stepfather made a career in the Army, and Leiser's advisor, Professor of Sociology Jim Sikora, a Marine veteran. Other IWU staffers went out of their way to help him adjust to campus life when he started classes in January 2014. Assistant Dean of Students Matthew Damschroder and Doug Meyer, associate director of Residential Life in housing operations, helped him find an apartment where he could live without a roommate.

"I had some anxiety and was uncomfortable living with other people right away," Leiser says. "The readjustment to civilian life wasn't easy, but Doug and Matthew really took care of helping me."

Leiser was also anxious about the University's academic rigor, but his self-discipline and military work ethic transferred to his study habits. "I had focus, I wanted to get things done, and those things had to be perfect," Leiser says of his first semester. "That reflected in my grades."

Though the transition from soldiering to academics went smoothly, adjusting socially proved more difficult. Then Damschroder told Leiser about an opening for a summer job as a conference assistant within the Office of Residence Life (ORL). "I was apprehensive at first about working with other students, but I just jumped in," said Leiser. By summer's end, he'd made some good friends and ORL staffers encouraged him to become a residential advisor. His first RA position was at Gulick Hall, but eventually he transferred to another hall for a floor that other resident advisors had warned was "trouble." Staff Sgt. Leiser had no problem with those residents. He understood they meant no real harm; they were just young and didn't think much about the consequences of their actions.

Leiser was once that way himself. He knows he's different, in so many ways, from the guy who raced everyone else to be first to jump in the pool, fully clothed in high school graduation robes. Leiser no longer likes being the center of attention; in fact, he prefers it when no one pays any attention to him. He still struggles with large crowds and would much prefer to talk with someone one-on-one.

He looks forward to finishing his degree in May. With majors in both computer science and sociology, Leiser is interested in working in predictive analytics. Or he might earn a master's degree. Perhaps he'll go into law enforcement or work as a private contractor outside the U.S. He enjoys trying to better understand interactions between cultural groups and institutions and the breakdowns that can lead to social disorder. He's not worried at all about what the future may hold. And he'll graduate without debt thanks to the Yellow Ribbon Program, in which IWU participates.

"I've always appreciated people who work hard for what they want," Leiser said. "In the Army, I respected every rank above my own. They'd earned those stripes. I wanted to be that rank as well.

"It's the same thing here," he says of IWU. "I respect so many people here for how hard they work. I've challenged myself to achieve, and a lot of people have helped me do that.

"I knew this would be a great place for me. It just took me a while to get here."