

Brothers serve together as sergeants major

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USASMA Public Affairs

They grew up together as both brothers and best friends. They experienced high school and worked after-school and weekend jobs together. They have dedicated their lives to serving our country and to the noncommissioned officer corps together. And, as Sgt. Maj. Byron Ferguson pinned the rank of sergeant major on Phillip Ferguson during a May 1 promotion ceremony at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, the true brothers-in-arms embarked on yet another chapter of their lives together.

Phillip will soon graduate from the Sergeants Major Course Class 57, and Byron, a Class 56 graduate, is stationed here with the 1-44th Air and Missile Defense Battalion.

The Florida natives said that in their 40 years of collective military service, this is the closest to each other they've ever been stationed.

"It was huge to have him be here to pin me," Phillip said. "I actually came here last year to pin him too. It's really been like a capstone on our military careers, to be able to both reach this level, and pin each other."

Phillip joined the Army in 1987, a year after his younger brother, Byron.

"Our older brother also served, and I guess you could say that it was his letters home about the Army that got me thinking about joining, and then when Byron joined right out of high school I thought, 'I



Sgts. Maj. Phillip and Byron Ferguson hug after Byron pinned his older brother, Phillip, with the rank of sergeant major May 1.



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Sgt. Maj. Phillip Ferguson, left, poses with his brother, Sgt. Maj. Byron Ferguson, by the chevrons at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, just moments after being promoted to sergeant major May 1.

can't let him do it alone, and I also can't let him out do me," Phillip said.

Neither of the brothers thought that they would stay in the Army this long or make it to this level when they first enlisted.

"It just seems to have happened," Byron explained. "When it came time for either of us to reenlist, we'd always be there for the other, encouraging each other to stay the course."

While some Soldiers say they find discipline in the military, or that it instills in them a sense of drive and accomplishment, the Ferguson brothers have a different description of what the Army has been for them.

"Coming from a family of eight siblings, we learned the importance of discipline at a very young age," Byron explained. "Our family taught us strength and built our character, so I have faith that no matter what we would have done, we would have succeeded."

"In fact, I think that's why we have done so well in the Army, and why we have chosen to stay and make it to sergeants major – it works for us, because thanks to our family, we already understood discipline and character," Phillip agreed. "I love the way the Army works – the way it rewards and recognizes discipline – it was designed for me."

Though they credit much of their success to their upbringing, the brothers have achieved family firsts in both their military and educational careers.

"Our older brother retired from the Army early, so we are the first in our family to reach sergeant major," Phillip said. "[Byron] was the first to get his degree, and I am finishing mine up, which also makes us the first in our immediate family to earn degrees."

But, if it's up to them, they will not be the last Ferguson generation to wear a uniform or earn a degree.

"We both have two children," Phillip said. "I talk to my 22-year-old daughter about serving and kind of coach her toward maybe the Air Force – but we'll see."

"And, I have two boys, 7 and 3, so they're still young, but they'll tell you about Soldiering – they know a lot about it already," Byron added. "My oldest knows the rank structure, and they both know the 'Yes, Sir' and 'Yes, Ma'am' and saluting. It'll be their decisions when the time comes, but I try to introduce the military to them any chance I can."

When asked how much longer the two of them intend to wear the uniform, both brothers smiled and answered, "who knows – we'll see what the next few years bring."

"My goal has been to reach command sergeant major, but that really depends on if there are spots available in my [military occupation specialty]," Phillip said.

Byron, who is an alternate for command sergeant major, said, "it's a little bit more feasible in my MOS, so we'll see."

"But, it's about time for us to give back to our family," he added. "We've been able to serve like we have because of their support, we both owe them."

Regardless of how much longer they wear the uniform, the Ferguson brothers foresee facing their military retirement and future chapters of their lives the same way they've faced everything up to this point – together.

Lithuanian military leader meets his U.S. Army counterpart

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Senior Warrant Officer Arunas Birbalas, the first command sergeant major of Lithuanian Land Forces, met with his U.S. counterpart, former Sergeant Major of the Army William O. Wooldridge, at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy on May 10.

Both assumed their groundbreaking military position at the age of 43, although Wooldridge served as the first Sergeant Major of the Army in the U. S. 40 years ago – from July 1966 to August 1968 – during the Vietnam War era. Wooldridge has since retired and now lives in the El Paso area.

During the two-hour meeting, Birbalas and Wooldridge discussed their common experiences of providing leadership to enlisted soldiers during conflict. Birbalas said there are many lessons from Wooldridge's era that can be

applied to today's international fight against terrorism. The Lithuanian army continues to provide support to NATO efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. At the end of the meeting, Birbalas presented Wooldridge with mementos of Lithuania, including a handmade plaque with the Lithuanian national flag and badge of the Lithuanian Land Forces.

Birbalas is one of two Lithuanian soldiers currently attending the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, a nine-month course for U.S. Army Soldiers, as well as U.S. military from sister services, and selected international soldiers. Course goals include increasing international cooperation and improving military professionalism. Both Birbalas, of Garg_dai, and Senior Warrant Officer Darius Zubrickas, of Kaunas, will graduate May 22 and return directly to military service in Lithuania.



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Command Sergeant Major of Lithuanian Land Forces Arunas Birbalas, left, presents a handmade plaque to former Sergeant Major of the Army William Wooldridge during a meeting May 10 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. The two shared their experiences as the senior enlisted leader of a NATO army.