

# For these U.S. Army War College students, a graduation like no other | Charles D. Allen

By **Capital-Star Guest Contributor**

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This summer two cohorts of U.S. Army War College students will graduate, adding to the lineage that started in November 1904. The Resident Education Program (REP) will graduate in early June and followed by the Distance Education Program (DEP) in mid-July —together they will comprise the USAWC Class of 2021. It would be an understatement to say that their Carlisle Experience was different from previous years.

As in all life journeys, each year provides its own challenges, and academic year 2020-2021 certainly presented significant global and domestic issues.

The acknowledgment of the COVID-19 global pandemic in mid-March 2020 had immediate implications for Carlisle Barracks and the War College. We had to react quickly to change from the all-too-comfortable conduct of in-person/face-to-face instruction to deliver our professional military education courses by remote means.

For many faculty members, it entailed crash courses in several and varied application platforms, such as Zoom, Teams, Blackboard, WebEx, and Virbela to deliver the content of our electives. Faculty had to adjust, adapt, and re-craft methods of teaching.

This challenge provided the opportunity for the DEP faculty to share their experience and expertise with the REP faculty. REP Students also had to

reframe their roles as learners in the remote environment, something our DEP students navigate throughout their two-year course.

We, the War College's administration and faculty, purposefully conducted an assessment of the situation to help determine an appropriate reaction to the changed circumstance. Social distancing, mask protocols, and handwashing/sanitization became principles turned into disciplined behavior to protect our community.

We quickly learned and adopted the phrase, "out of an abundance of caution" in our local planning, policy development, and decision making for the Class of 2021. The DEP cohort missed out on its two-week mid-June session on Carlisle Barracks and participated in the course through remote learning

For our distance class, the pandemic exploded last spring while many reserve component officers (state National Guard and Army Reservists) were already balancing civilian jobs along with a demanding War College academic schedule.

Some students were caught up in the turbulence of the pandemic while returning from overseas deployments. The medical professionals in the class also had to deal with the challenges of fighting an unknown and deadly virus alongside engaging in their military studies.

For the incoming resident class, about 400 students and faculty arrived in Carlisle from across the nation and globe with our international students. As one remembers the summer surge of COVID-19 infections and death, it was a time of uncertainty and ambiguity, as well as threat.

The AY2021 resident class would miss the traditional onboarding and socialization of seminar icebreakers, convocation, seminar norming, and Boatyard Wars that would set the tone within seminars and across the War College.

While some may lament the absence of such traditional events in the first two weeks to establish and build relationships, our students and faculty found ways to connect with each other and embrace the learning journey of the year.

Our military culture is much different than some aspects of our U.S. society. Scholar Adam Grant penned an essay in New York Times on the challenge people have experienced over the past year of the pandemic. He described their predominant mental and emotional state as languishing—“a sense of stagnation and emptiness.”

I would offer that USAWC maintained its sense of purpose for the education mission combined with care for its people in a dangerous situation of spreading infections in our community and state.

In doing so, we focused on understanding the challenges and being patient in developing approaches and policies to navigate the COVID-19 landscape while providing high-quality professional military education.

I hope that our student cohorts will appreciate their demonstrated agility and resiliency after completing a unique year.

Their Carlisle experience will provide some interesting ‘war stories’ of differences from expectations, but more importantly serve as a foundation to address future challenges they as leaders will inevitably face in the years following their War College graduation.

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