Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Host:

To kick us off, could you each please introduce yourself and tell us about your roles at the University of Michigan?

Tom Church:

Yes, absolutely. I am the professor of military science with the Wolverine Battalion, also the chair of the Army Officer Education Program. So the way that the university sees us versus the way that the Army sees us, and how we interact with the space here.

Host:

What is your title?

Tom Church:

I am Lieutenant Colonel Tom Church. So 05 in the Army.

Host:

Thank you.

Thomas Hance:

I am Master Sergeant Thomas Hance. I'm the senior military science instructor for the ROTC program here in Michigan. Some of my roles include instructing warrior tasks and battle drills, which range from land navigation to map reading to chemical training, first aid, and physical fitness training as well. I oversee all that stuff and make sure that it's getting taught the right way to our cadets.

We also prepare competitive cadet teams for events such as Ranger Challenge, drill team, color guard, so on and so forth. And then also, we prepare our cadets for that commissioned officer to non-commissioned officer relationships that they'll experience at the platoon level and higher at garrison, which garrison is our military installation.

Host:

Fantastic. Thank you. I want to start off with a really broad question, but I want to make sure that our audience has a really solid understanding and is familiar enough with the topic to move forward in the conversation. So can you tell me what is Army ROTC?

Tom Church:

Ultimately, the Army ROTC is a place where we train, mentor, and inspire college students to become second lieutenants in the U.S. Army. That is our mission. We're at over 1,700 colleges and university across the United States, and we are part of the 7th Brigade, which is 38 colleges and universities just in the four state area... I'm sorry, five states. Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

The broader look at that, so the expanded purpose of where it is, it is an opportunity for us to provide students in exchange for a paid college education is a guaranteed post-college job, post-graduation job, and then they commit to serve after that. I think another interesting point to describe here is that once commissioned as an Army second lieutenant, they have an opportunity to go into three different branches of the U.S. Army, either active duty, Army National Guard, and then the Army Reserve. Each one of them have different commitments for time, post-graduation.

Host:

Can you tell us about life as a cadet? What is this experience like for students?

Tom Church:

The life of a cadet, I can speak from experience, but I'll get to that, I think, later in the interview. So they're like any other student at the University of Michigan. This is like any other class at the University of Michigan. You get two hours of class throughout the week, with a two hour lab. We happen to be in the chemistry building, but it's like a chemistry class, right? And we've got additional time that's spent one weekend every semester where we go over to Fort Custer near Battle Creek and we do three days of training out in a field type environment, doing all the things that Master Sergeant Hance was describing at the beginning.

The other opportunities include military semi-formal and formal events. So things like balls and gatherings, formal speaker events, those kind of things that we have here right on campus. We've got events and clubs. We've got the color guard that is part of a tri-service. So we're just one part of the ROTC. There's Navy and Air Force here as well. So we call it the tri-service color guard. You see them at every football game, you'll see them at basketball games, raising and lowering the flag.

We also have opportunities at... Master Sergeant Hance was at a Detroit Tigers game not too long ago, a couple weeks ago. Our Ranger Challenge team is our varsity sport here, and I like to call our cadets on that team our student cadet athletes. They've got a rigorous training regimen. Every day, they're out, every morning, running and ruck marching and putting up ropes and doing all kinds of training. That's our varsity sport for the ROTC.

The one unique thing that we were discussing before coming in is that this gives cadets an opportunity to be placed in leadership actions or activities on a consistent basis where other students might not have that opportunity. In the Army, one thing I like to say is sets and reps. Every time you get a chance to be in a leadership role and doing it often and more often, that prepares you to be more confident and more collected and... We're doing it in a safe environment here before they have to go and do it for real, when other things are on the line, like your job or you can imagine the other things.

Host:

Are there any common misconceptions about Army ROTC that you would like to address, or just anything that you want everyone to know about Army ROTC that they might not realize?

Thomas Hance:

Yeah, so one of the misconceptions, I guess, would be whenever we're training out at the Nichols Arboretum, we take our dummy rifles is what we call them. They're just rubber. They look like real rifles, but they're dummies. They're rubber. So while we're training, we never carry real weapons, we never carry any ammunition. But some people are... They'll make a complaint to someone and thinking that we're doing something dangerous out there. But that's a common misconception. We're never doing anything dangerous out there. So it's a training environment, and we keep it strictly to training.

Tom Church:

I think the other thing that we've discussed is, or we discuss with all the cadets when they come in or the prospective candidates, is the multiple job opportunities that come. We described the active duty, National Guard, and reserves. Within those, there are several different jobs that we can do. Myself and an infantry officer. There's field artillery, you can go aviation. Those are just some of the combat arms or armor branch combat arms. But there's also all kinds of different things, logistics, medical, chemical, there's EOD. They have just a plethora of things to do that are opportunities as part of what we said before, with that guaranteed job afterward.

Host:

You spoke a little bit about the uniqueness of what students get to... The opportunities that they have when they're a part of Army ROTC. But what do you feel like is one of the most unique experiences that these students have as a part of Army ROTC?

Tom Church:

The University of Michigan Army ROTC, we've got some awesome support here from the university and from some select donors. And we take our seniors on a trip to Normandy. We call that a staff ride. So it's a commissioning requirement that we take the seniors, who are about to become second lieutenants, to go and do a battle analysis on something and then not necessarily reenact, but discuss the actions and activities of the leaders that are at each one of those specific points. So you can imagine the largest amphibious operation that happened in the world ever on D-Day, there's a lot of things to talk about. So we're there for about a week, and I mean, it's just a great opportunity. And no other Army ROTC program in the country does that type of movement to train their cadets.

Host:

That's amazing.

Tom Church:

It's something we do every year. So the university supported us for four years. There was one gap year where they went to Gettysburg as part of the staff ride because of the COVID problem, cross-border issues and going overseas. And now we've got a donor's going to cover us for the next five, right? So one of the things that I think we'll get to later on is how can people support. And so the Giving Tuesday, Giving Blueday, the folks are out and we might need some help with that.

Host:

Yeah, definitely. So you've told us a lot about Army ROTC, and now I want to ask you each about your personal journeys to your positions. Could you each share a little bit about how you've gotten to where you are now?

Thomas Hance:

This coming January, I'll hit 20 years active duty. I joined the Army just a couple weeks before the war started in Iraq. The reason I wanted to join the military was because I'm originally from New York City, and after 9/11, I just felt like I had to do something. So I dropped out of college to join the military in 2003. And since then, I've had multiple deployments, but I've been placed in leadership positions as the years went by. About three years in, I started my first leadership position, and I've been in positions like platoon sergeant, operations, ser major, first sergeant. Actually, just before coming here, I've done the first sergeant job for about 48 months or so.

My experience is what the Army will look at to place in certain positions, because I've done a drill sergeant before. So I've been an instructor before and I've also worked at the Drill Sergeant Academy. That's where you train individuals to become drill sergeants. That's a selection process that's pretty vigorous to go through to get selected for it. And just based off that experience, the Army will look at that and strategically place individuals in certain positions, and that's what led me here today.

Host:

Excellent. Thank you. Lieutenant Colonel?

Tom Church:

Yeah, so I commissioned from the University of Michigan ROTC program, second lieutenant. From there, went to the infantry and held lots of different jobs for the last 19 years. So from second lieutenant as a platoon leader into the company executive officer position. From there, was in a ranger instructor position down at the U.S. Army Ranger School in the Florida phase of that.

I commanded an infantry rifle company out of Fort Knox, Kentucky. That was my first command. And then I guess from that job, went on to one of the broadening things that is unique, and I worked at the National Ground Intelligence Center. So a little bit of intelligence support to the national level intelligence apparatus. Following that, I went down to Fort Hood, Texas and served with the 1st Cavalry Division and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment as a squadron executive officer and then the regimental operations officer.

And then off to Germany I went for a planning job in one of the component commands for the Special Operations Command Europe, and was a lead planner for their plugin to the overall theater level planning. And as you can tell today, there's a lot of activity in Europe that I'm happy to be able to provide some service to that.

From there, I came back and my second instructor job was I was a range instructor. I was at West Point, where I was dual-hatted as an instructor for cadets for the past year and then the deputy at the Modern War Institute. So my first way to give back to the cadet apparatus there and help instruct and teach, inspire the future lieutenants of the Army. And then a great opportunity, found my way back to the University of Michigan.

So it's been quite the breadth. And I think that is a little bit of just a short description of one way that a second lieutenant or a cadet can find themselves going, right? Another way is alongside what Master Sergeant Hance said, in every position, like we're sitting here today, there's an officer in OIC and an NCOIC, and that's just how we roll in the Army. It's something that's also unique, I think, to being in the Army and always having a partner to help you out, help you make the right decisions, or more informed ones also.

Host:

Those are both incredible journeys. with that, I'm curious as to what it is that brought you to the University of Michigan. Do you have any special ties to this area or to the university?

Thomas Hance:

I do not have any special ties to the university. In the commissioned world, they have a different way for their selection process. They get interviews. And in the enlisted side, we don't get to have interviews. Well, the Army's trying to do some changes to allow us to have some say in our future. But like I said, they just vet our careers and what we've been through, where we've been, and they select us for certain positions.

I've never been in Michigan before. The closest I've been here was to be in New York City. So I'm excited to be here. I love Michigan. My family loves it, and we're curious to see how much colder it's going to get.

Host:

Well, that's good you're enjoying it. And Lieutenant Colonel, what about... I know you have some ties.

Tom Church:

I think I've alluded to it a little bit up until this point, so I'll kind of go from the beginning to the end. I was born near Grand Rapids, in Kentwood, on the west side of Michigan. I'm also a member of the Match-e-be-nash-she-wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, also known as the Gun Lake Tribe. Some folks who are from around here probably have heard that name once or twice. We've got a veterans group that I'm proud to also be a part of. It's the Ogitchedaw. And hopefully, I'll be able to kind of tie the university to some of those veterans activities as well, and we'll probably talk about some of that in a little bit.

So after high school, I came here to the University of Michigan in 1999, looking for something to focus my time and effort and be a part of a student group. So I had no aspirations prior to my freshman year of joining the military, and then found the ROTC. We did a canoe trip, which I'm glad to hear that they're still doing 20 years later, or 24 years later, and sitting around with some hot dogs and chow. And after a canoe trip, they hooked me into the Ranger Challenge team and did all those activities. So graduated from here in 2003, and then did all the things that I talked about in those.

While I was sitting over at West Point, there's a unique new opportunity that Master Sergeant Hance was talking about and how the Army's trying to change its talent management process. Within that, and for the officer side, there was changes in the strategic global security apparatus, right? So Ukraine kicked off, changed a lot of different things. And the person who was supposed to come, no longer was coming, which provided a vacancy. The former professor of military science was one of my company commanders in my first unit. So he knew I was a Michigan grad and called me up and said, "Hey Tom, it's open. You want to put your name in? I'll help and endorse you to come here." So I dropped everything and found my first way back to Ann Arbor. So it's great to be back.

Host:

That's incredible. What a great story. I imagine that it's a really unique perspective also with your Native American heritage and finding all of that, so thank you for sharing that. It's really great. So as we approach Veterans Day, could you tell us what the federal observation means to you personally?

Thomas Hance:

Personally to me, Veterans Day is a way of recognizing America's sons and daughters who selflessly decided to raise their right hands and take the oath to protect this great country, with the understanding of what was at stake in doing so. That's my take on Veterans Day.

Tom Church:

I think Veterans Day, to me, it's about recognizing something that is greater than yourself. I think that part of taking that oath and committing to something and being part of a team or an organization that's geared toward a common goal. And it's all about remembrance too and not forgetting... I mean, it's not Memorial Day, but it's an opportunity to remember the living service members that we have that are among us. I mean, there's a sizable population of veterans just in Southeast Michigan and on this campus too. So it's just a great opportunity to kind of slow down for a day and think about service to something that's greater than yourself.

Host:

Thank you. How can our campus community members acknowledge Veterans Day in impactful and respectful ways?

Tom Church:

The first thing, and I'll keep this one short, I mean, it's easy, thank a veteran. They're walking around everywhere. And there's easy ways, anonymously. Look for the hat or the uniform or something that... Veterans are proud of their service. So if they're in line, buy their coffee. If they're sitting down at a table, walk up and say, "Thanks," or pay for their meal. I think that goes a long way.

Host:

Thank you. How does the Army ROTC observe Veterans Day?

Tom Church:

Our specific event, which I'd invite anybody to come down to at eight o'clock in the morning on Veterans Day, the tri-service color guard, so all three services, will be out on the Diag and will do the flag raising. So we'll conduct a ceremony for the raising. And then at the end of the day, towards sunset, I think it's 18:00, so 6:00 PM for everyone else, right? So 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM, we'll do a flag raising.

Host:

How can more people learn about the Army ROTC?

Tom Church:

This is a great opportunity and just want to first now say thanks to M Social for helping us out. We have a campaign here within the Army ROTC that we want to get our word out and be able to tell people who we are and what we do.

We have a Twitter, @ArmyrotcUmich. We've got LinkedIn, University of Michigan ROTC. That one is a bit under construction. We're starting that one off now. Facebook is also under construction. We also then have Instagram, and it's @umich\_arotc. And then also our website, army.rotc.umich.edu.

Those are just the online ways. The other spaces would be look for us out every Thursday down at the Arb. You can come and see what we do. I mean, it's a public space and you can see us. It's every Thursday. Just about every Thursday, we're down there at 4:00 PM to 6:00 PM. And then every morning, you'll see us at some place on this campus between 6:00 and 7:30, doing physical training. A lot of times, we're down at Ferry Field. Other times, we'll be right on the Diag, or running around campus somewhere.

Thomas Hance:

Another way would be we walk around this campus to and from our vehicles, and then a lot of students see us and kind of avoid walking towards us, for some reason. But we're very approachable. If anyone has a question, they can always... If they see us in uniform, they can ask a question and we'll be more than happy to answer any questions they might have.

Host:

Fantastic.

Tom Church:

The last one. I think I said it earlier, but we are located in the chemistry building. So right off of Fletcher Road, right where it comes to a T at North University, that's our main door. You go in the door, come around to the right, hit a button hook towards the door, and that's where all the ROTC units are. Army, then the Air Force, and Navy right in that hallway. So come down and see us.

Host:

So everyone who comes on Michigan Minds, each expert, anyone who's generous enough to give us their time, I like to ask them this question. It's one of our staple questions. What is a takeaway that you hope everyone listening and taking in the information that you're sharing today, what's a takeaway you hope that they have from everything you've shared?

Tom Church:

The one thing I would like to say, that our cadets, our student cadet athletes, right, are... They're just like you at the University of Michigan. They drive to be the leaders and best while preparing to serve our country as officers in the Army. I think that sums it up is what we want to get across to the community.

Host:

Thank you. And then do you want to share any other information or upcoming events for the Army ROTC?

Thomas Hance:

Yeah, so some upcoming events, you can look for us during Giving Tuesday to support the ROTC before Thanksgiving. And every year, mostly every military unit has this Turkey Bowl competition. We have one coming up with Eastern Michigan. So we're currently in the process of doing some coordinating, when we're going to play at, where and what field we're going to use. And then look for us during Giving Blueday to support the ROTC in the spring as well.

And then with the tri-service color guard that we've talked about several times, they're at the football games, they're at the basketball games. We just started doing some professional games. So I was recently at the Tigers game. We're coordinating to go to the hockey games as well. We have our Marine counterpart who works with the Navy ROTC, and he's doing all the coordinating for that stuff.

Host:

Fantastic. Well, thank you both so much for your time. Thank you for your service. We greatly appreciate you giving us the opportunity to learn more from you and share this information with our audience.

Tom Church:

Leaders and best. Go Blue.

Thomas Hance:

Appreciate the support.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #UMichImpact.