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## **Putting aside the war for a few hours to learn how to make the world better**

**Lisle, Illinois** ~ Joe Ricciardi was responsible for ensuring that people and material were transported safely through some of the toughest terrain in the world. He had 1,000 highly-trained, highly-motivated personnel at his command.

But being at the frontlines of America's war on terrorism did not prevent Ricciardi from pursuing a doctorate degree from Benedictine University's new Ph.D. in Values-Driven Leadership program.

Lt. Col. Joseph A. Ricciardi commanded the 863<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion that is stationed in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The 1,000-man Engineer Route Clearance Task Force provides tailored route clearance support to five brigade-level Marine, British and Canadian commands.

Headquartered in Darien and primarily composed of troops from Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin, their mission is to clear the roads of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to protect the civilian population, Afghan Security Forces and Coalition forces.

“What this meant day to day is that we drove very slowly in extremely survivable vehicles outfitted with the most advanced weapons, optics, robotics and communication equipment in the world to find and neutralize IEDs,” Ricciardi said.

“Those soldiers are undeniably and inarguably the bravest soldiers on the battlefield,” he added.

Ricciardi recently returned to the states from his second tour in Afghanistan. He also previously served in Iraq. In civilian life, the Valparaiso, Ind. native is married with two children and is Director of Analytics for HAVI Global Solutions in Downers Grove, Ill.

Although a military base thousands of miles from home hardly seems a likely location for a classroom, for a few hours a night, at least, Ricciardi was able to put the war on the backburner.

“Very strange circumstances that got me to this point,” he said. “I thoroughly enjoyed going back to school for my M.B.A., and briefly looked into doctoral programs. But I couldn’t figure out what to study and didn’t think I could work it into my schedule.

“Then one day in Afghanistan I ran into an old Army friend who worked for me on my last tour there in 2002 and who told me about the Benedictine Ph.D. in Values-Driven Leadership. After he left my office, I got online and read about the program and immediately realized it was exactly what I wanted to do.”

Benedictine University’s Ph.D. in Values-Driven Leadership program is a first-of-its-kind program designed for senior leaders who want to enrich people’s lives, produce products and services that benefit society, and contribute to the health and sustainability of the planet.

“The program is designed specifically for people like Joe who are literally on the frontlines of making a positive difference in the world, whether it’s in business, health care, non-profits or the military,” said James Ludema, Ph.D., director of the Center for Values-Driven Leadership at Benedictine University.

“It’s an unbelievably rich learning environment in which senior leaders like Joe engage in spirited dialogue with their peers, Benedictine faculty and Distinguished Visiting Scholars from around the world, all with a focus on developing great values-driven leaders and building great sustainable organizations,” he added.

Ricciardi took a week’s leave to come back to the United States to begin the program, and after returning to Afghanistan took classes (which meet on weekends) via Skype.

The support among Ricciardi’s men and classmates was overwhelming.

“The support was AWESOME!” he said. “I was very nervous about the perception of getting preferential treatment. Everyone in the program is making some sacrifice to attend the class – time away from family, friends... I really didn’t want to be treated any differently.

“I asked the class ‘for their permission’ to attend via Skype while I was deployed, and they unanimously supported it,” he added. “They were great. They sent me cards, letters, food, homemade cookies...but more than anything they provided encouragement.”

Ludema said the sacrifices made by Ricciardi’s teachers and classmates are small compared to those made by people like him who serve their country in the military.

“Benedictine University has a long tradition of supporting our men and women in uniform with a variety of programs and scholarships, and we consider it a privilege to be able to support Joe in this way,” Ludema said, “He makes a huge sacrifice for all of us, and our ‘sacrifice’ is tiny by comparison.

“Plus, the other students love Joe, and he made an invaluable contribution to the classroom discussions via Skype even though there was a nine-and-a-half hour time difference,” Ludema added. “Sometimes, he had to get up and put on the headphones at 3:00 a.m. to join us.”

The support among Ricciardi’s co-workers at HAVI International, where he leads a team of incredibly talented people who provide a wide range of analytical services to their clients, was equally overwhelming.

“This is another area where I am a bit embarrassed by the amount of support I received,” Ricciardi said. “From the day that I found out I would be leaving, the company was behind me 100 percent.

“There was a while where I couldn’t get all the packages they were sending me out fast enough,” he added. “My office looked like the snack isle in a grocery store!”

There is little time in the military for the mundane activities of civilian life like grocery shopping. Ricciardi began each day in Afghanistan with physical fitness at 4:30 a.m.

“That was about where the typical part of the day stopped,” he said.

The next several hours were spent on personnel issues, IT/communications, logistics, operations, meetings, conferences and strategic planning. Because his units were spread across several hundreds of miles, much of his time was spent traveling between bases and out on missions with his troops.

“As difficult as it was, it was equally as fulfilling,” he said. “I read more than I ever have in my life. I found myself reading in some strange places – helicopters, cargo planes, combat vehicles – but was also able to use much of the material I learned.

“I mean if you are studying leadership, there is no better (raw) laboratory than a combat environment,” he said.

Ricciardi already applied some of what he has learned to his role in the military, but what he will gain from Benedictine’s Ph.D. program in Values-Driven Leadership was not the only driving force behind his decision to enroll.

“I am at a point in my professional life – both militarily and on the civilian side – where leadership is probably 80 percent of my job description,” he said. “Looking at my roles in that light – and wanting to be the best at what I do – the program is a great fit.

“But what is important is not what I will gain, it is what those who I lead will gain,” he added.

Today, after months of war, Ricciardi is back home among family, friends, co-workers and classmates.

“Schoolwork was a type of stress reducer, allowing me to take my mind off of the war for a few hours a night and still feel like I was being productive,” he said.

“I can’t say that will be the same at home,” he added. “It may be far more stressful.”