



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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164 soldiers start classes at GCC

Sgt. Jesse Bagoyo described his job as a convoy commander on deployment in Afghanistan in 2013 as “a lot of high tension.” He transported VIPs to different areas in and around the U.S. base there, doing his best to avoid the insurgent’s land mines that have killed or injured so many. Now, he’s home and unemployed. But hopefully not for long. Bagoyo is one of 164 unemployed or under-employed returning Guam veterans taking advantage of the Guam Community College “Keep Your Guard Up” training program.

Keep Your Guard Up is the only program of its kind in the United States. A collaborative brainchild of GCC, the administration of Gov. Eddie Calvo and island business leaders, it was put together when Guam National Guard Adjutant General Benny Paulino informed Guam’s leaders that of the 588 men and women of the I-294th Infantry Regiment deployed to Afghanistan last year, a full 260 of them would be returning home in January either unemployed or under-employed.

This morning, Bagoyo and 163 other soldiers started classes at GCC to earn a certificate in one of eight programs the College put together for the returning vets.

“This will be easy,” said Bagoyo, when asked to compare going to school to performing his mission in Afghanistan.

“We had to do something for these soldiers,” said Victor Rodgers, GCC Asst. Director of Continuing Education and Workforce Development. “Our mission is workforce development. These men and women have served their country honorably and done Guam proud. Nowhere else in the country are they more patriotic,” Rodgers said, referring to the fact that Guam and Micronesia have the highest enlistment rate, and unfortunately the highest casualty rate, per capita, of anywhere else in the country.

While the soldiers were still in country, GCC surveyed them and formulated a 90-day industry certification program in eight areas: automotive general service technician; A+ computer networking; electrical; emergency medical technician; heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), supervision and management, heavy equipment/truck driving, and welding.

“We got the support of the Guam Chamber of Commerce, the Guam Contractors Association, the Guam Department of Labor and the Agency for Human Resources Development, and island businesses,” Rodgers said. “Businesses actually came to us and said, ‘I have openings. I want to hire these guys. Can you put together a program for truck driving certification?’ The response has been incredible.”

“It’s not a handout. It’s a hand up,” said Lt. Col. Mike Tougher, Commander, 1st Battalion of 294th Infantry Regiment, US Army, told the soldiers. “Just like we’d roll out on any mission, you gotta plan and you gotta execute the plan. If somebody’s struggling, you look for opportunities to help each other.” Tougher told the men and women that the program would not only benefit their families, but also, the island of Guam, and the Guam Army National Guard, in the form of more educated, more prepared soldiers and members of the workforce.

“The biggest risk of this whole program is with you,” Lt. Col. Robert Crisostomo, Guam Army National Guard human resource specialist, followed. “All you have to do is show up, get into that class, sit, and start learning. Graduate at the end. We will get you placed in jobs.”

“It’s an honor to have these men and women be here on our campus,” said Dr. Mary Okada, GCC president. “As the wife of a retired military officer, I know the commitment that is needed. And GCC is committed to this mission to educate these soldiers and get them on a sustainable life path,” she said.

SSgt. Manser Patis, a 294th squad leader, said, “Anything that has to do with education, I’m for it.” Patis is also enrolled in the electricity certificate program. “I lead, so if I lead, they follow,” he said of his men. “I won’t stop until I see all these guys get their certification.”

The soldiers are expected to complete the GCC Keep Your Guard Up program in late May.

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For more information, contact Jayne Flores, GCC Asst. Director of Communications & Promotions, at 735-5638 (office), 483-6409 (cell), or via email at jayne.flores@guamcc.edu.