At the 2019 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo™, the Academy hosted then-Surgeon General of the United States, Jerome M. Adams, MD, MPH. Dr. Adams spoke at a session and met with attendees as well as the Academy’s Board of Directors (as seen in the photo on this page) — a meeting I was honored to attend.

Dr. Adams’ visit was facilitated by a group of dedicated staff people including Academy member Dennis Anderson-Villaluz, MBA, RD, LDN, FAND, a lieutenant in the U.S. Public Health Service Commission Corps and a former electrician in the Air National Guard who returned to school to become an RDN. In 2019, he was a special assistant to the U.S. Surgeon General and is one of the hundreds of members who serve our country and our profession in uniform.

RDNs in uniform have been a fixture of our organization since its founding. The Academy’s highest honor, the Marjorie Hulsizer Copher Award, is named for a distinguished dietitian who served during World War I, and the award’s first recipient was Ruby F. Motley, an Army dietitian who served in the Pacific during World War II and was taken prisoner after the fall of Corregidor. (1) You can read more about the life of a modern-day military dietitian at https://foodandnutrition.org/blogs/student-scoop/life-military-dietitian/.

According to Anderson-Villaluz, his training as an RDN was superb preparation for his role on the Surgeon General’s team, including his FNCE visit. “The schedule of the U.S. Surgeon General is always fluid and requires that I remain focused and adaptable. As a dietitian, I feel that my formal education along with my clinical experience allows me to succeed in this role, since many dietitians are skilled in multitasking, communicating with the public and keeping a tight schedule.”

RDNs in the active-duty military say the variety of job openings in the service makes for a rewarding career. Bethany Ann Deschamps, PhD, RD, CSSD, LD, CSCS, is a 20-year Army veteran who now serves as deputy director for the nutrition care department and research director for the Army’s graduate program in nutrition at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State.

“I appreciate the diversity of job positions I have had the opportunity to serve in, both nutrition and non-nutrition...
related,” she says. “It has diversified my skills as a nutrition professional and helped develop me as a leader, an administrator, a researcher and a clinician. I have also been afforded many education opportunities to advance my knowledge and skills in the area of dietetics. Like many other careers, serving in the military can be demanding and very challenging at times, but even these experiences were rewarding, as I learned a lot and they helped me to be a more well-rounded, adaptable and resilient person.”

From Air National Guard to RDN: Dennis Anderson-Villaluz’ Journey

I earned my bachelor’s of science in dietetics at the University of Nevada — Reno while serving in the Nevada Air National Guard as an aircraft electrician for C-130s. I wanted to serve after September 11, since my goal was to become an officer. The Air National Guard provided me with the opportunity to do both. Once I finished my training as an electrician, I started my course work to become a dietitian. I had a wonderful experience in the Air National Guard but left in 2007 due to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” As a proud veteran and dietitian, I started a new journey in community nutrition.

My first job was with the Women, Infants and Children’s (WIC) program. Over the next 10 years, I worked at both the local and regional levels, where I would eventually learn about a small but mighty uniform service, the USPHS Commission Corps.

There are almost 100 outstanding dietitians in the USPHS Commission Corps, serving in a variety of roles around the country. We are America’s health responders, where a dietitian is not only a subject matter expert or clinician but a leader, supporting important missions such as establishing a contact tracing programs, setting up vaccination clinics or responding to hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires or any other humanitarian mission. It is an honor to be a part of such an elite group.

For Bethany Ann Deschamps, Service Is All in the Family

I started my initial military training just a few months before 9/11. I didn’t consider the military until I was a senior in college and was trying to decide what dietetic internships I was going to apply for. My advisor mentioned the Army and Air Force dietetic internship programs and that she thought I would be a good fit for either.

I like the idea of serving our nation, as well as having a paid internship and a guaranteed job after I finished. I am also a fitness enthusiast and really liked the idea that working out and staying in shape was part of my job! Also at the time, my older brother was serving in the Army and I really wanted to join the ranks with him. I thought, “If he can do it, so can I!”

I would highly recommend military service to young nutrition professionals, not only for the reward of service to the nation, but also because of the many opportunities forthcoming for dietitians in the military, specifically with the Army’s Holistic Health and Fitness System, where military and civilian dietitians are embedded in military units to work with an interdisciplinary team to improve the overall health, performance and mission capabilities of our soldiers.

Thank you again to all Academy members who serve in uniform. And to all members — please consider sharing this article with your friends and colleagues to make them aware of our colleagues’ contributions and the potential that uniformed service holds for a rewarding nutrition and dietetics career.

For more information on a career as an RDN in the U.S. military:
https://www.careersinthemilitary.com/career-detail/dietitians
https://youtu.be/nnkLJiGmApA
https://www.usphs.gov/professions/dietitian/