

Former Marine Eddie L. Copelin, II, MD, PGY3 at RWMC, shares his path to medicine

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In honor of Veteran's Day in November, the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* caught up with former decorated U.S. Marine Corps veteran **EDDIE L. COPELIN, II, MD**, a PGY3 internal medicine resident at Roger Williams Medical Center in Providence.

Q. Can you share some information about your background and early life?

A. I am 36 and grew up on Long Island, NY. At an early start I have had a passion for pushing myself outside of my comfort zone by striving to not conform to what was considered the norm for my community, family, or race.

I come from a family with 11 siblings who taught me to enjoy and embrace each other's differences. I was always intrigued with science from the television shows of Mr. Wizard, The Magic School Bus, Bill Nye, fueling my fascination to learn more about the scientific world around me. My father's failing health with type 2 diabetes influenced me to pursue medicine.

In high school, I was introduced to the U.S Marine Corps; its slogan, "The Few, The Proud, The Marines," captured my desire to challenge further my ability to be a stronger person while

being part of an elite organization with a strong military tradition and history. I fulfilled my first dream of becoming a U.S. Marine when I enlisted at the age of 17, despite my mother's wishes due to my father's recent death. I served in the U.S. Marine Corps reserve from 1999–2007 with the 6th Communications Battalion, Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn.

During this time, I was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) where, after an 11-month tour in Iraq, I received the Navy Achievement Medal along with other unit citations.

Before my deployment, I had started undergraduate school as a pre-med student at the New York Institute of Technology in Old Westbury, NY. Due to my deployment, I missed a year and a half of college, pushing my graduation time expectancy back.

Q. Was your service in any way a decisive factor in your decision to study medicine?

A. My service was a decisive factor in pursuing my dream to become a physician. After my deployment and being back in school I realized that I had no mentors or even the faintest idea of what steps I needed to take to become a physician. However, as a U.S. Marine, we are trained to improvise, adapt, and overcome the challenge we have in front of us – giving up is not an option for Marines. With those values instilled in me, I made sure to pursue my dreams despite the challenges ahead.

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When reviewing AUA, my service was a decisive factor; it was warming to find out that AUA not only accepts the GI Bill but also created a scholarship program honoring American veterans and EMS personnel who want to pursue a career in medicine.

Q. Who has been the most important influence in your professional life?

A. There are so many important, influential people in my professional life that have helped me; however, the most influential person has been my sister, Natasha Copelin, RN. She has been there for each rise and fall of my professional life, from my time in the U.S. Marines, undergraduate school, medical school, internal medicine residency, now pursuing a fellowship in gastroenterology and eventually family life. Natasha has not only been a sister but also a friend. I am truly blessed to have her.

Q. Are you involved with veterans today as a physician, and if so, what are the greatest medical issues veterans deal with in your experience both as a vet and young physician?

A. As the VA is directly across the street from Roger Williams Medical Center, the bulk of veterans go there for care. However, when I have the privilege of taking care of fellow veterans the greatest medical issues I commonly see from a fellow veteran's view is that the older vets with complex medical problems require more home services to prevent hospitalizations. However, these services may not always be available to the individual, which creates an issue in decreasing overall U.S. health-care cost. As a young physician, a common medical issue veterans and the U.S. as whole deals with is the cost of medications.



Q. What do you do to chill out and get away from the rigors of residency?

A. By experiencing new things. Outside of weightlifting, I enjoy the outdoors, which includes hiking. My mind loves to be stimulated by new experiences so whether it's trying new vegan dishes my fiancé makes, hiking, traveling, or entertainment, the main criteria when I plan to get away is to ask myself: Have I experienced this yet?

Q. What are your plans after completing residency?

A. After residency, I will continue being involved with Big Brothers and Sisters with youth who have an interest in medicine. I will also continue to push myself beyond my comfort zone by entering a gastroenterology fellowship and rejoin the U.S. Armed Forces as a reserve physician while seeking out other leadership positions in my next phase of medical training. ❖