



An aerial photograph of a desert landscape, likely a military base, with a large tent structure in the foreground. The terrain is arid and brown, with some structures and roads visible. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

TOUR OF DUTY COMPLETED

AFTER ALMOST 60 YEARS, THE SUN SETS ON OU ADVANCED PROGRAMS.

BY APRIL WILKERSON

AS THE SPOUSE of an Army major, Rose Petrunyak loved seeing the world and supporting the mission of the U.S. military. But moving from base to base was hindering her own career progression.

Then she discovered the University of Oklahoma.

Petrunyak, a native of Pennsylvania, had never been to the Sooner State, but in 2007, while stationed with her husband in Heidelberg, Germany, she walked into an

office that changed the course of her life. It was the European headquarters of Advanced Programs, OU's pioneering endeavor to provide graduate education to military members and their families wherever they were based around the world.

Launched in 1964, Advanced Programs was highly innovative for its time—faculty members traveled from Oklahoma to bases throughout Europe, the Pacific and across North America to provide in-person instruction and an authentic college experience.

After nearly 60 years and thousands of graduates, the program conferred its final master's and doctoral degrees in May, a sign of a world that has changed dramatically in six decades. The program has left a lasting mark on OU administrators, faculty and staff, as well as learners who leveraged their degrees for progression in rank, career advancement, or transitioning to civilian life.

"Advanced Programs was very popular—at one time, it made up about one-third of all graduate degrees at OU. And it was considered cutting-edge to send faculty abroad to provide in-person instruction. We used to say that the sun never set on Advanced Programs because we literally had a presence around the world," says Shad Satterthwaite, who previously oversaw Advanced Programs as assistant vice president for OU Outreach and, later, as associate dean for the College of Professional and Continuing Studies.

OU leaders made the difficult decision to end Advanced Programs after COVID-19 halted in-person instruction and edu-

cational delivery methods underwent a virtual revolution. OU Online, the university's 100% virtual undergraduate and graduate program, will continue growing the OU family around the nation and world and is equally available to armed forces members.

The Government Employees Training Act of 1958 sparked a national effort to provide educational opportunities to the military. Until then, military members, their families and associated civilians and contractors had few options to further their education while actively serving the country.

OU was among only a handful of universities whose leaders began conversations with the U.S. Civil Service Commission about how graduate degree programs could be delivered to the military.

Leading the effort for OU was the late David Ross Boyd Professor and Regents' Professor of Economics Alexander J. Kondonassis. Other notable early leaders

were Thurman White, dean of what was then called the OU Extension Division and the College of Continuing Education; James Pappas, former vice president for University Outreach and dean of the OU College of Liberal Studies; and George Henderson, former dean of the College of Liberal Studies, who founded OU's Human Relations Program.

Advanced Programs officially held its first course—Contemporary Political Theory—in 1964 at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City. The program grew exponentially, soon offering courses at the Naval Weapons Laboratory in Washington, D.C.; Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska; and the former U.S. Air Force base in Wiesbaden, Germany.

By 1981, degrees were offered at dozens of bases around the world in fields ranging from public administration and economics to social work and international relations. It was a time when the internet was not yet a reality and the only educational alternatives were correspondence courses that emphasized self-study.

Henderson developed the Human Relations Program shortly after joining the OU faculty in 1967. That degree became part of Advanced Programs a few years later, driven by Henderson's mission of creating "human relations foot soldiers" around the world.

"I believe we were providing opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds and life experiences," Henderson says. "By and large, people in the military are a little older, and because of that, their life experiences informed our classroom interactions. They asked deep, profound questions. In essence, I was providing an opportunity for critical thinking."

Henderson traveled the world teaching human relations. He viewed the instruction not as "preparation for real life," but real life itself. "How we treat one another in the classroom gives us a good idea as to how we will interact when we leave the classroom," he says. "There were no stupid ideas or perspectives in our classrooms. My approach was that we must be civil and willing to listen to each other to find common ground."

For each three-credit-hour course they took, students prepared by reading assigned materials, followed by an intensive,



OU staff members wear traditional German dirndls in Garmisch, Germany.



Left: Students from U.S. Air Force bases in England participate in a 2019 Advanced Programs course.

Below: Though thousands of miles from OU's campuses, Advanced Programs graduates still celebrate the traditions of Commencement.





OU staff members greet potential students during an education fair aboard the Navy destroyer USS Porter.



Former OU Graduate College Dean Lee Williams, right, tours a C-130 at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany.



Doctoral candidate Gabriele Murry receives her OU degree.



Advanced Programs staff members at the annual European conference in Wiesbaden, Germany.

six-day format of face-to-face instruction with faculty members—four evenings and all day on Saturday and Sunday. A project or paper typically was due a few weeks after the final in-person session.

“Most people were like me—we wanted to be in the classroom for a real experience with a professor; we didn’t just want to get a degree quickly,” says Petrunyak, who earned a master’s degree in human relations in 2010. “It was fantastic having such a high caliber of professors coming to Europe. This was one of the few opportunities we had to continue our education. I could get around Germany, but I never could have gotten a degree at a German university. Advanced Programs was so valuable for people like me.”

While she was earning her degree, Petrunyak also began working for Advanced Programs in Heidelberg, where Peggy Lerner was director of all European sites. The three-person office was busy with the logistics of scheduling learners, arranging transportation for arriving faculty members and ensuring compliance with government contracts, but the work was

inspiring, says Petrunyak, who now works in military initiatives for Penn State.

“It was hands-down one of the greatest work experiences of my life,” she says.

OU faculty members felt much the same about interacting with a population of learners who brought unique perspectives to the classroom. That was the experience of Vickie Lake, associate dean and professor in the Early Childhood Education Program at OU-Tulsa and director of the Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum doctoral program. In 2014, she began serving as coordinator for the ILAC master of education degree for Advanced Programs.


Although the students she taught were pilots, flight engineers and military spouses, most were in the master’s program because they wanted to become teachers or work in educational leadership once they left the military. However, their military roles led to classroom discussions unlike any Lake had experienced in Oklahoma.

“We often talked about leadership skills and communication styles in our courses,” she says. “Many students tailored their

assignments to their work. One worked on a flight line and examined the clarity of her communication with pilots and other personnel on the tarmac. Another student tried different presentation styles when briefing his general. That allowed me to take a unique worldview back to my classroom in Oklahoma.”

Advanced Programs learners were earning degrees sometimes a world away from Norman, but they still experienced the joy and pride of Commencement ceremonies. Faculty and administrators were on site to present speeches and place hoods on students according to their degrees. Sometimes bagpipes were played; without fail, there was always “Boomer Sooner” and the “OU Chant.”

Advanced Programs will live on in the people whose lives it changed, Lake says.

“One of the most valuable aspects for me was that it was a way for OU to give back to the military community,” she adds. “You’re serving our country for us; what can we do for you?” 

April Wilkerson is the editor of OU Medicine.