

Mark J. Watkins of Rome Twp. at home in elite Air Force Academy

BY JAMES LOEWENSTEIN (STAFF WRITER)
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Submitted Photo Mark J. Watkins, right, salutes during a ceremony after completing his first year at the Air Force Academy.

Mark J. Watkins of Rome Township is about to complete a four-year degree at the elite U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Getting into the Academy is very difficult, and a significant percentage of those who enter don't end up graduating, he said in an interview while home for the Christmas holiday.

Only about 10 percent of the applicants to the Academy are accepted, and to get accepted, each applicant must secure a recommendation from a congressman, senator or the president, said Watkins, who graduated from Northeast Bradford High School in 2006.

Such a recommendation is hard to come by. Former U.S. Rep. Donald Sherwood, who recommended Watkins for a slot at the Academy, can only recommend on average one or possibly two applicants a year to the institution, he said.

And Watkins was up against a pool of applicants from throughout Sherwood's district who were also vying for the congressman's recommendation.

Watkins said he is glad he entered the Academy.

"This is exactly what I want to do," he said.

After graduating from the Academy next May with a bachelor's of science degree in aeronautical engineering, he will enter flight school. He says he hopes to become a fighter pilot.

Watkins knew how to fly before he entered the Academy. His father, DuPont employee Mark A. Watkins, was in the Air Force and is a pilot, and Mark J. Watkins had taken flying lessons at the flight school at the Bradford County Airport in Towanda Township.

However, Mark A. Watkins said: "I never really pushed him toward it (entering the Academy)."

The Academy is "everything I expected it to be" in terms of the demands it places on its students, who are called cadets, Mark J. Watkins said.

However, he said: "I expected to get yelled at more" by older cadets and staff at the Academy.

At the Air Force Academy, students carry a higher course load than at most colleges, he said.

"I think we average 18 credits a semester," he said. Last semester, he took 23 credits.

At the Academy, Watkins gets up at 6:45 a.m., and has breakfast at 7:20 a.m.

"Classes start at 8 a.m.," he said. "Typically I'm in class from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m."

Besides academic courses, he takes a military class, he said.



Image Gallery for Mark J. Watkins of Rome Twp. at home in elite Air Force Academy



POLL

Last year was economically tough for the nation. Now that 2010 has begun, would you say you are ...

- Optimistic that the situation will improve
- Hopeful, but hesitant to get too optimistic
- Expect more of the same for a significant time to come
- Expect the situation to get worse before it gets better
- Not sure what to expect

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The 4,000 cadets at the Academy are required to attend lunch, and it has become a tourist attraction for people to watch the cadets marching in formation to lunch, said Mark A. Watkins.

After classes are over, Mark J. Watkins participates in athletics.

All cadets must participate in athletics, which could be on an inter-collegiate or an intramural team, he said.

Among the physical activities he has pursued at the Academy are rugby and mountain biking.

In the evenings, he studies for his courses.

There is taps at 11 p.m., after which lights are required to be out. "That doesn't always happen," he said.

The cadets do not pay tuition, room or board, and they receive a monthly stipend, he said. However, those who graduate from the Academy are committed to serve five or more years in the military.

Watkins said that, because of the particular career path he is pursuing in the military, he will be required to serve at least 10 years in the military after he graduates.

Watkins said there are many opportunities that are offered to the Academy's cadets that are not available anywhere else.

For example, he has participated in a program called "Operation Air Force," where cadets are placed during a portion of the summer at U.S. Air Force bases. While at the bases, the cadets have an opportunity to find out about careers in the Air Force which they may want to pursue.

Through Operation Air Force, Watkins was placed one summer at Andrews Air Force base, "which is where the president and everybody flies out of," he said.

While at Andrews Air Force base, he flew on Air Force 2, which is used to transport the vice-president, he said.

At Andrews, "I flew with the First Helicopter Squadron," which transports "a lot of senators and other people," he said.

Watkins is currently in the top 20 percent of his class academically, and will graduate from the Academy in May, said Watkins' uncle, Joseph Watkins.

Those who graduate from the Academy are commissioned as second lieutenants.

Watkins' mother, Susan Watkins, said she is "incredibly proud" of her son.

"I always told him to go for everything he could, and to experience a lot of life, and I think he has, so far," she said.

Watkins' father said he is also proud of his son, but has some concerns about the risk he faces with his long commitment to military service after graduation.

Mark J. Watkins had been a stand-out athlete at Northeast Bradford High School.

During his senior year at Northeast Bradford, he was captain and MVP of both the varsity soccer and track teams.

During his high school years, he had also participated in Science Olympiad and had trained to become a referee for youth athletics. He had also trained in karate while a student in the Northeast Bradford School District.

James Loewenstein can be reached at (570) 265-1633; or email: jloewenstein@thedailyreview.com

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