

**STEVEN S. GIORDANO**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, USN, Ret.**

April 7, 2020

Honorable Robert Wilkie Jr.  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
810 Vermont Ave., NW, Room 1000  
Washington, DC  
[Robert.Wilkie@VA.gov](mailto:Robert.Wilkie@VA.gov)

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I spent half of my 30-year career in the United States Navy serving as a senior enlisted advisor as a Command Master Chief, Force Master Chief, Fleet Master Chief and finally as the 14<sup>th</sup> Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. As a leader, a Sailor and a Shipmate, I am sure you recognize the significant value a senior enlisted advisor brings to any organization. I hope you will give this letter great consideration before making any decision impacting active duty service members and our veterans.

I write this letter to offer my highest level of support for the continued enrollment of students using the GI Bill benefits at the University of Phoenix. I also would like to offer my professional experiences in the development of Navy leaders to include educational opportunities for all active duty service members and veterans. As well as my own personal experience with the University of Phoenix and to share on behalf of thousands of veteran alumni like me the principal reasons I chose the University. My hope is that you will work cooperatively with the University of Phoenix to ensure it remains an option without disruption or interruption for its existing students and the next generation of military students following in my footsteps.

As the 14<sup>th</sup> Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, I served as the senior enlisted advisor to the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations in all matters dealing with enlisted personnel and their families. This includes the importance of providing flexible and alternative higher education opportunities for the more than 280,000 Sailors serving across the globe. Additionally, I advised the Chief of Naval Personnel on how best to develop leaders for the *Navy the Nation Needs*. This resulted in the development of the Navy's Enlisted Leader Development Strategy, "*Laying the Keel, Developing the Backbone of our Navy.*" One key element in the development of those leaders is a strong foundation of higher education. The services have and continue to make significant policy changes regarding enlisted education. In the end, the goal is to encourage all who have served or are currently serving our country to find a school and degree program that enables professional and personal growth while fitting the unique circumstances of their life, as University of Phoenix did for me and tens of thousands like me.

It is important to understand the history of Navy enlisted higher education and factors that contributed to the significant increase of college enrollments and degree achievements during the time period beginning in 2007. For years prior, the Navy was conversed in how to



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drive degrees for enlisted Sailors. Then, initiated by the release of NAVADMIN 301/07, the Navy announced that Sailors preparing for advancement would be awarded promotion points for an accredited degree. This changed the landscape for all Sailors regarding advancement and knowing advancement is directly tied to retention. The number of points were adjusted based on the level of degree attained for E-4 through E-6, while E-7 through E-9 were given "*favorable consideration.*" Career Development Boards for Sailors chaired by senior leaders (most without degrees) began to address degree goals, visits and calls to local Navy College offices increased, and since the policy change advancement rates for Sailors with degrees are significantly higher than their counterparts without a degree.

In 2006, I was stationed at Navy Information Operations Command Georgia as a cryptologic direct support operator deploying onboard submarines and had negotiated for orders to serve as a faculty advisor at the Navy's Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA)-the premier enlisted professional military education institution for select senior enlisted leaders from all military services and allied/coalition nations. To better serve those future students, I took it upon myself to advance my education and enroll as a student at the University of Phoenix-a decision I did not make lightly. I was a deployed Sailor, husband, father, and enlisted leader of the most dynamic Fleet Cryptologic Augmentation Center in the Navy. In July 2006, I completed my first-ever online course and in May 2007 after completing seven more classes with the University my AANF was conferred. My educational journey did not end there. Shortly thereafter, I enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Management program at the University of Phoenix not knowing at that time I would be headed to serve as the Senior Enlisted Leader onboard the frigate, USS McCLUSKY and be deployed for the next ten months. I am proud to say I completed 15 courses and graduated with Honors and my BSM was conferred in January 2010 while deployed at sea.

When I came to University of Phoenix, I was driven by the discipline and commitment instilled in me through military service. Like myself, you will find that many veterans chose the University and its degree programs for understandable reasons: Its accessible online delivery removed the barrier of reaching a physical classroom. The faculty were real-life professionals with real-world business experience in areas we found valuable. We worked hard to earn our degrees and brought the same tenacity and sense of personal responsibility to our education as we did to serving our country. What I did not realize was the scope and magnitude of the impact my education and experience at the University would have on my life. Professionally, the education gained in my degree undoubtedly helped propel me to the highest enlisted rank in the United States Navy and the consistently overwhelming success of the organizations I served and the people I had the honor and humbling opportunity to serve alongside.

It is alarming to see the University attracting negative news headlines in the press. Far too many of these news stories fail to include our voices, the veterans who completed our degrees at the University, and how the University of Phoenix worked with us to achieve our academic aspirations among the unique circumstances of our lives. Each of us is willing to share more personal details of how we found the University, and what our experience has been like since separating to civilian life. For me, my experience at the University of Phoenix positively impacting my personal and professional growth, the welfare of my family, the effectiveness of my Sailors, and the effectiveness of the Navy as an organization.

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The military has always encouraged the pursuit of education, the pursuit of personal effectiveness, and the pursuit of continuous improvement. University of Phoenix enabled me to accomplish these objectives while being on active duty and raising my family. In fact, my positive experience using distance learning models pioneered by the University of Phoenix inspired me to deploy more blended learning and online curriculum in my own military role, promoting the effectiveness of more Sailors around the world and in turn, promoting the safety of our country and freedoms.


I conclude with a simple request that the University be judged on its merits as a leading provider of quality, accredited programs. Each of us had unique professional and personal circumstances that only the University of Phoenix could address. The University offered us a clear opportunity and because of our training in the service, we had the means to seize on that opportunity. Please do not underestimate how disruptive your decisions about the University could be in the lives of thousands of servicemen and women. There is time to prevent a cascading impact that will hurt veterans and active duty personnel. I would hate to see any VA action cause further damage to them required by the DoD.

Secretary Wilkie, in your previous position as the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, we worked on some highly sensitive situations facing military service members. Together, we implemented policies profoundly impacting the future of military service. I thank you for your leadership during those challenging times. But mostly, I thank you for your listening to the enlisted voice through all those decisions. A voice that came to you from the Senior Enlisted Advisors from each military service.

I hope this letter finds you and your family healthy and safe during these challenging times in our nation and across the globe. Thank you for your continued service to our veterans and their families.

Please feel free to contact me at [mcpon14@outlook.com](mailto:mcpon14@outlook.com) if you have any further questions. I welcome the opportunity to speak with anyone with the Department of Veteran Affairs regarding this matter.

Sincerely,



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