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Ensign Dan Rai Proves Hard Work and Fate Can Move Mountains

Naval Postgraduate School Public Affairs Office

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Article By: Barbara Honegger

Fifteen years ago, a young Nepalese boy named Dhyan Rai took a lantern to an American couple trekking through the Himalayan village where he went to school, hoping to learn more English and offering to help them with their Nepalese. That simple act marked the beginning of an incredible journey that would eventually take him to the International Flag Garden of the Naval Postgraduate School – a journey that would have as many peaks and valleys as the high mountains where he was born.

Ensign Rai – who changed the spelling of his name to Dan – is now a proud new American citizen, a registered nurse and an officer in the U.S. Navy, thanks to the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program. As the capstone in a months-long process, and a journey worthy of the big screen, Rai was administered the oath of office by commissioning officer Lt. Kyle Alcock of Navy Recruiting District Portland in that aforementioned flag garden at NPS.

Given the honor of pinning on the new shoulder boards were Drs. Karen Tierney and James Vawter, in whose Monterey, Calif., joint medical practice Rai had worked. The two physicians are close friends of Rai’s “American Mom and Dad” Anne and Craig Knoche – the American couple he met in Nepal a decade and a half ago – who weren’t able attend but followed the ceremony by speaker phone.

“Dan is a most wonderful and remarkable young man whose accomplishments are of heroic proportions,” said Tierney, who has also been one of Rai’s American ‘parents’ for more than eight years. “In the short span of his life – he’s now 27 – Dhyan has made a journey across not only half the world but across the span of 800 years, from a medieval village in the high mountains of Nepal where there’s no written language and he tended cattle at the age of three to cosmopolitan America.

“My long-time friend and college roommate, Anne Knoche, and her husband Craig recognized a ‘diamond in the rough’ when young Dhyan came to their tent one night willing to let them use his family’s rare and precious lamp oil,” Tierney related. “They were so inspired by his love of learning, enthusiasm for life, infectious good humor and benevolent attitude that they decided to sponsor his education, first in Katmandu, and then in the U.S. Dhyan’s courage and talent enabled him to accept the challenges of a new language and a new culture, which he accomplished with dignity, intellectual curiosity and dedication, all the while firmly focused on his goal of a lifetime career in medicine.”

“I want to give a special recognition to my American parents, Mr. and Mrs. Craig Knoche, who made it possible for me to come to this great nation nearly 10 years ago,” Rai told his gathered colleagues, family members and friends at the commissioning ceremony.

Rai remembered the day he met the Americans who were to transform his life.

“My success story began on the day when I met Craig and Anne Knoche, the most generous of American couples, when I was working to put myself through school in a ‘tea house’ – something like your American ‘bed and breakfast’ but with a dirt floor,” recalled Rai, whose short 5-foot stature is dwarfed by his energetic and engaging personality.

“During the day, I was so curious to see these tall, white, blonde-haired people on the side of the trail, which was totally foreign to me. They were putting something they called shampoo on their hair and using a toothbrush and toothpaste. I’d never seen these things before,” Rai continued. “After that, I decided to just hang out. I was usually very shy, but for some reason, not that night. They didn’t have any light to cook their dinner, and the oil for the lantern I took them is very precious and had to be hiked in by a 10-day walk from the nearest road. The only light was the lantern.

“In the village of Chheskam where I come from there is nothing for medical attention – no doctors, no nurses, no hospital, no clinic. The nearest road is a 10-day hike, then a whole-day bus ride to reach the nearest medical facility. Very few are able to travel such a long way and are forced to suffer and die at home with no idea what the cause is, and many die of malnutrition. My own father died when I was only two months old. Seeing all this as I was growing up, I told everyone I wanted to be a doctor, by which I meant I

“The thing that struck me the night he brought the lantern was how much he wanted to learn,” Anne Knoche recalled. “He was trying so hard to learn English. My husband and I talked about it on the trek through the area around Mount Everest after we left and said, ‘Why not give this boy who is struggling so hard a chance?’ It was the right thing to do.

“We recognized him as an exceptional individual and sponsored what amounts to helping him travel through a time machine,” she said. “We paid for his tuition to complete his secondary schooling in Nepal, then brought him to the U.S. in 2001 to pursue his life-long dream of becoming a medical professional. We first enrolled him in community college to improve his English and adjust to American life, after which he went to the University of Nevada at Reno where he earned a B.S.N. in Nursing. After interning with a clinic here in California while preparing for his exams, he passed his national boards to become a Registered Nurse.

“When you help someone who’s trying so hard, it keeps paying forward,” Mrs. Knoche stressed, “but we also have a human obligation to help others go further. We’re so fortunate in this country to have been born here. It’s ‘There but for the grace of

Rubio.)

Ensign Dan Rai, left, states the oath of office with commissioning officer Lt. Kyle Alcock, right, of Navy Recruiting District Portland. After 15 years of hard work and fate’s intervention, Rai will realize his long-time dream of serving as a Naval officer, and a medical professional, aboard the USNS Mercy in November. (U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Rob Rubio.)
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At dark, all the children in Bung village would usually leave the Tea House,” he recalled. “This night, a little boy came back with a kerosene lantern, all alone. He had an old British-English reader and wanted to practice his English, which is amazing for someone who essentially grew up in the 14th century. At one point, Anne was trying to explain that in English there are words that sound different but have the same meaning. Before she could complete the sentence, she slowly said the syllables “Syn-on-o-mous.” That really surprised and impressed us. We left the next morning and hiked for another month and a half. When we got back to Katmandu, we wrote him and asked what he wanted to do when he grew up and enclosed a blank piece of paper and a self-addressed stamped envelope to make it easy for him to write back, and found someone to hand carry the letter to his village. When he wrote back, we almost threw the letter away, as it was inside a flyer inside a piece of junk mail. But it fell out and, as they say, the rest is history.

“After that, the whole world opened up to Dhyan,” Knoche said. “We and his older brother Bhim, who has also come to the United States, put him through the British school in Katmandu. I’ll never forget his first letter on arriving in the city, where he’d just seen his first bike and car and had his first experience with electricity. He was so excited – he thought they were all wonderful. He was essentially traveling through a time machine into the modern world.”

“I am most grateful to the United States Navy and the Naval Postgraduate School for your participation in helping me to celebrate my commitment,” Rai said at the commissioning ceremony attended by two of the three Nepalese students currently enrolled at NPS. “This is not only a success story for me, but also for you who have supported me.”

“Without your support, I would never have been able to make the journey from a remote village in the Himalayan mountains of Nepal to a new life as a United States citizen, a registered nurse, and a Naval officer. I give you my pledge to always strive to be worthy of the faith and support you have shown me … and I want to thank the greatest military institution in the world – the United States Navy.”

“I happened to arrive in this country on a student visa barely two weeks before September 11th,” Rai recalled. “My American ‘parents’ [the Knoches] were in complete shock, but my ‘dad’ calmly told me what had happened and what this country stood for, and that America always represented the highest aspirations of the human spirit and the importance of self defense of the country by the military. Completely from within myself, I have made these ideas and values my own. I love them and live by them, and will be proud to defend them.

“When I was in nursing school at the University of Nevada, military recruiters came to the classroom,” he recalled. “In my class of 50 students, I was the only non-citizen and the only one to go up to them and say I wanted to be able to serve in uniform to protect those who protect this great nation. But they couldn’t take me, because I wasn’t a citizen. This was so ironic, because I was the only one who wanted it so much. When it finally happened, I will never forget the moment that I was able to take the oath of allegiance and became a citizen, thanks to the MAVNI Program. I felt so humble and that it was such an honor, and that anything can be achieved in the United States of America. No other country exists in the world that compares with America.”

It was a Naval Postgraduate School faculty member and a serendipitous event at the university that turned the tide for Rai’s ascension into the MAVNI program. Initiated by the Department of Defense in 2008, MAVNI’s goal is to recruit 333 greatly needed non-citizen health care providers and 667 non-citizen linguists into the U.S. military services.

“I’d received my nursing degree but hadn’t been able to find a job, and so was facing deportation,” Rai recalled. “By chance, Drs. Tierney and Vawter, with whom I was then living, were invited by [retired Marine Corp] Lt. Col. Ken Petersen to the 2008 NPS Winter Ball. They told my story to the guests at their table that night, which happened to include an NPS student, Army Major Brent Clement. Major Clement happened to know about the MAVNI program and that it was to officially begin the very next day. The next morning Dr. Vawter told me, “Dan, this is an incredible synchronicity – this program was made for you!” and took me to meet Major Clement. After talking with him, I quickly put together my application to the program and sent it to every branch of the military.”

While the MAVNI program seemed perfect for Rai, he hadn’t heard back on his application, and time was running out.

“When months passed and I hadn’t yet received any positive answer, Dr. Vawter took me to the Naval Postgraduate School to see Graduate School of Business and Public Policy Professor Douglas Brook, a former comptroller of both the Department of Defense and the Navy who is also director of the NPS Center for Defense Management Research,” Rai recalled. “Professor Brook told me he’d contacted the Bureau of Navy Medicine, which suddenly gave new life to my application and, after that, everything happened very fast.”

Things moved quickly, indeed – at breakneck speed given the normal bureaucratic red tape.

“In January 2010, I received a letter from the Navy selecting me into the program as an Active Duty Officer Candidate,” Rai said. “My new Navy recruiter, Lt. Alcock – my first recruiter was Lt. Cmdr. Kuhl – quickly enlisted me with an authorized leave of absence while I studied to pass the tests to become a naturalized citizen. Facilitated by the MAVNI program, I became a U.S. citizen on June 18 and was appointed an Ensign in the Navy Nurse Corps by President Obama four days later, on June 22.

“Both from his story and meeting him in person, Dan impressed me as a great young man and the kind of person you really want to help,” Brook said.

“I feel that what I’ve done is a great accomplishment, but I have to remind myself that I couldn’t have done it alone, and how important it is for all of us to help each other climb the mountains that we have in our own lives,” Rai said at the reception following the ceremony. “It’s important that everyone understands how badly I wanted this and how hard I worked and how long I waited for it to become a reality, but I know I didn’t make it to the top of the mountain alone. Thank you – thank you everyone – for helping me to get here.”

Among the most proud at Rai’s commissioning ceremony was his older brother Bhim, who now lives in San Jose, Calif., with his wife, also from Nepal, and their two sons. “This is wonderful,” Bhim said with a smile bursting with pride. “Coming from where Dan and I grew up, raised by a single mother, it’s an amazing journey that he has made across space and time. I am very, very happy for him and very, very proud of him. From the very beginning, both of us had this burning internal drive for education, which is the key to success and advancement in….”

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Dan Rai is an extraordinary and tenacious young man, having come from a society totally foreign to ours and being able to adapt and even excel in his endeavors here,” said U.S. Naval Reserve Lt. Cmdr. Paul E. Zahn, one of the officers who recommended him for the MAVNI Program. “In my eight years of active duty as a carrier pilot in the U.S. Navy and more in the active National Reserve, it has been my privilege to serve with many outstanding foreign nationals. Dan Rai is one of these outstanding individuals who have made this country stronger and more vibrant because of their incorporation into our society.”

At the commissioning ceremony, Rai received a letter and a certificate of recognition from the California State Senate signed by 12th District Senator Jeff Denham. “You are to be commended highly for your selfless dedication and work ethic. With the help of family and friends, you have seized the opportunities that our nation has to offer and with determination have fulfilled your dreams of becoming a U.S. citizen and serving as a Registered Nurse in the U.S. Navy. Congratulations and best wishes as you go forth to serve and defend this great nation.”

As for his home village in Nepal, where his mother and sister still live in a house with a grass roof, Rai says he’s not able to return because the Chinese communists have taken control and his life would be in danger. “But the world has gotten through and my village knows about my story,” he said. “They know that something good has happened to me, and that makes me very happy and very proud.”

Immediately after the commissioning ceremony, Rai flew back to Katmandu, where his mother and sister met him along with his longtime love, to whom he planned to propose. “She’s already said yes,” he said with a wide grin. “It’s the next step in taking my story higher. A lot higher.”

“After that, I will take advantage of any medical related opportunity in the Navy. I’d like to be a student at the Naval Postgraduate School some day, after I complete medical training to be a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist at the United Services Uniformed University in Bethesda.”

One thing you can be sure of — all this is only the beginning of the incredible story of Dan Rai’s Mountain.