

SISTERS *in* ARMS

Longtime friends, Ashli and Adrienne, realizing dream of military careers

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Sentinel staff

They've referred to each other as sisters for many years.

Now they, along with their families, refer to each other as sisters in arms, and rightly so.

At an early age, they began taking paths in school and in extracurricular activities that would lead them to where they are today.

Adrienne Duke and Ashli McDonald, who have been best friends since seventh grade, are at a crossroads that may take them on different journeys but with similar objectives.

And no matter how many miles may separate them, they believe their bond as "sisters" will keep them close.

Adrienne will soon follow in her two older sisters' footsteps by attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Ashli will attend the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Adrienne is the third Duke daughter to choose West Point and the military. Diana Duke, the oldest daughter of Ellen Stoetznor Duke and Dr. David and Janet Duke, of Nacogdoches, is a 2009 graduate of West Point and is in the 4th Infantry Division in Afghanistan and was nominated for the Bronze Star. Kelley Duke is a member of the West Point Class of 2012. Ashli is the daughter of Dr. Randy and Patti McDonald.

While they are both very certain about their choices and their chosen paths, they're a little nervous as they get ready to embark on a new phase of their lives. They will graduate from Regents Academy in May.

Anticipation

Adrienne's first day of basic training is June 27.

"I'm definitely nervous about that," she said. "It will be tough, but I think I am most



Left: Another extracurricular activity these "sisters" excelled at included running cross-country track. Their passion for activities that required being physically fit provided more preparation along their teenage journey for where they have come today. **Right:** Tae Kwon Do champions in 2009, Ashli and Adrienne Duke on occasion were sparing partners for each other.

looking forward to the school year and the academics. But I'll be able to spend the first year with my sister, Kelly, who will be a senior there."

Ashli said she is most looking forward to "the environment at the Air Force Academy.

"I really thrive in that structured kind of community where you are constantly being challenged," she said. Her basic training begins June 23, and she said she is "just as nervous."

"This is all very exciting," Ashli said. "This is an amazing opportunity for both of us."

Although military careers have been on their radar screens for years, both girls applied to and were accepted to other universities. Adrienne applied at MIT and Trinity, applying for ROTC scholarships, as well.

"... because I was certain that I was going to go into the Army," she said. "That was the branch that I focused on because of the opportunities

I already knew were available from my two older sisters. And it was the branch I felt I was most suited to. When I began my college search and had to start exploring financial opportunities, I definitely knew the Army was a big factor."

Ashli said she believed the Air Force "played to my strengths and passions," explaining that she only applied to schools that offered Air Force ROTC, and she was accepted to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach.

"I was about to accept my Air Force ROTC scholarship to go there right before I got my acceptance letter to the Air Force Academy," she said.

A certain path

Ashli said Diana Duke also served as an inspiration for her, so when she began researching where she wanted to go to school, she learned that academies look favorably on service in Civil Air Patrol

organizations.

"I located the nearest squadron, which was at Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport," Ashli said. "So I've been in Civil Air Patrol since I was 14.

"Being on Barksdale Air Force Base and being around the officers there that were in my group really had an impact on me," she said, adding she and her father established a squadron in Nacogdoches in January.

Both girls had to get Congressional recommendations in order to be accepted at their respective academy choices.

"We've been going through this process together," Adrienne said. "It's different, in that we're going to different academies."

"But the process is the same," Ashli said.

"And we were able to support each other through the process," Adrienne said.

The application process began over a year ago, seeking Congressional recommenda-

tions from their local congressman and both U.S. senators. They described the academy application process as "longer and more rigorous" than some of their college applications, and they required physical fitness testing.

"We both went for interviews at Rep. (Louie) Gohmert's office," Adrienne said. "I went one weekend and she went the next."

As students at Regents Academy, Ashli and Adrienne ran cross-country and track together. They've both been involved in Tae Kwon Do for the past six years, having been in some "pretty good fights," Adrienne said.

"At the end, we know we're helping each other out with the practice," she said. "It's just something we do together."

"I don't think there are too many things we don't do together," Ashli said with a laugh.

"We kind of made it our mission in junior high ... to get

involved in a bunch of the same extracurriculars," Adrienne said.

In addition to track and Tae Kwon Do, the girls are both involved with the Nacogdoches Public Library Young Adult Advisory board, speech and debate, Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools events, which are similar to UIL competitions. They have "mountains" of trophies from athletic and academic events over the years. Adrienne has expanded her martial arts training to include Shen Chuan with Joe Lansdale.

The Duke girls have done Civil War re-enacting with their family for many years. Ashli joined them for one encampment and was hooked, along with her whole family, for "hard-core camping" in tents on the ground and often in the rain. Both families travel the U.S. participating in re-enactments, such as in Shiloh, Tenn.,

Please see SISTERS, Page 3C



Contributed photos
Only about a month apart in age, best friends Ashli McDonald (left) and Adrienne Duke often celebrate birthdays together. This photo captured a scene from their 14th birthday celebration.



The strong women teachers and leaders of Regents Academy that have guided Adrienne and Ashli include Vicky Lymbery, Lara Sowell, Shannon Henry and MaryAnn Bentley.



Col. H. Farrar Bentley has functioned not only as teacher, but also was an endless font of military information.