



Supporting those who serve

U.S. military recognizes Radiation Medicine Chair Thomas and the department

On Valentine's Day, 2012, James A. Tanyi, PhD., became an American citizen. Seven months later, on Sept. 11, he enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserves, fulfilling a family tradition of military service that includes his father, who served 33 years in their home country of Cameroon.

The role would mean one weekend of training a month and two weeks away each year, adding to the already significant demands on Dr. Tanyi's time at his day job, as first staff medical physicist and then chief of medical physics and associate professor of radiation medicine in the OHSU School of Medicine.

Yet his boss was not only supportive, he wrote his letter of recommendation.

"We are grateful to have members of our department with this genuine phenotype of service," said Charles R. Thomas, M.D., professor and chair of radiation medicine, who has had several relatives in the military. "This is a phenotype you can't naturally construct, because we live in a country where selfishness is rewarded and being selfless, at least in recent years, can be viewed as a sign of weakness. Our faculty and staff members who serve in the military are the kind of people we would like to have more of."

"Meritorious leadership"

This September, the U.S. National Guard and Reserve recognized Dr. Thomas and the Department of Radiation Medicine with the Above and Beyond Award, the Patriotic Employer Award and the Seven Seals Award "for meritorious leadership and initiative in support of the men and women who serve America."

Dr. Thomas and his department follow OHSU's ethic of going beyond the legal requirement for supporting military service. He partners with faculty, trainees, students, staff and their supervisors to adjust schedules and balance remaining workloads while celebrating the valor and dedication of all involved. He has also been known to take on extra shifts himself when military members need to be away.

"It takes organizations that support service to feel comfortable that you can serve and not be penalized," said Joshua Cobbs, who took a leave from his role as department administrator in late September to provide operational support with a U.S. Army command group in Florida. "Dr. Thomas viewed my service as a very positive thing."

That support permeates the department.

Hans Kim, M.D., a third-year resident in radiation medicine, is grateful to his residency program director, Nima Nabavizadeh, M.D., assistant professor of radiation medicine, and the whole department for supporting his service as a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve as part of the Army Medical Department Professional Management Command (APMC).

"Medicine is like the military where your ultimate goal is to serve people, and both are similar in that rank matters," Dr. Kim said. "Many of us are prior service members or doing either active duty or in the reserve, which makes OHSU an integral part of our country's military. Also, most of us who serve from OHSU are in the medical field, so it's very important that we have full support from our institution, so that soldiers defending this great country are taken care of."

Dr. Kim also called out Austin Bunker, M.S., second-year resident in medical physics, and Douglas Ellis, an IT support analyst for the department, who are U.S. Navy veterans. Bunker separated from active duty in 2017 as a lieutenant (O-3) after five years at Naval Nuclear Power Training Command teaching Officer Mathematics, Physics, Reactor Dynamics and Core Characteristics. Ellis was honorably discharged as a submarine sonar technician, STS3(SS).

An holistic approach

Dr. Tanyi said he is most moved by Dr. Thomas' recognition that his monthly weekend service in the reserves impacts not only his availability for work but his time with his family. Dr. Thomas met Dr. Tanyi, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio in 2002 and recruited him to OHSU in 2007.

"I come to our clinic, and I give my all to our patients. But then a weekend a month, instead of being with my family, I am out doing something else for the good of our country," said Dr. Tanyi. "Dr. Thomas takes a much more personal approach to not only my safety and well-being but that of my family, and many others will attest to this. That's just who he is."

Dr. Thomas also models caring for veterans, personally staffing the lung cancer clinic at the Portland VA Health System every Monday afternoon.

"Many people think of their mortality with a cancer diagnosis, so the relationships with these patients are authentic, not superficial," Dr. Thomas said. "It's a privilege for us to be able to provide care to these fellow citizens; certainly, we can't repay them for their service."

His faculty embrace caring for veterans as an opportunity.

Said Dr. Kim, "Serving veteran patients has been one of the most rewarding experiences I've had as a resident physician here at OHSU."

Photo caption: Clockwise from left, Dr. Charles Thomas, Dr. James Tanyi, Dr. Hans Kim during his swearing in and one of three meritorious citations from the U.S. National Guard and Reserve to Dr. Thomas and the Department of Radiation Medicine.

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