



*Sgt. Saral and Elisha Shrestha meet with Congressman Jeff Fortenberry in Washington, D.C.*

Breaking from "fiscal cliff" discussions today, I thought I'd share with you a unique experience I had recently. I often have the chance to meet interesting people in Washington, and some leave a lasting impression. Last week, I had the pleasure of meeting the United States Army Soldier of the Year, Sergeant Saral Shrestha.

Only 24 years old, Sgt. Shrestha has a maturity beyond his years. At 17, he left his native country of Nepal to move to the United States to pursue higher education. He is an expert in five languages. The U.S. government has certain exceptions in law for those with highly specialized skills, like Sgt. Shrestha, allowing foreign nationals to join the military. Joining the U.S. military was the right decision for Sgt. Shrestha, but it was also the right decision for us, citizens of the United States.

Sergeant Shrestha quickly excelled in everything he did. He entered combat operations in Afghanistan. He received many commendations, including the Combat Action Badge, two Army Achievement Medals, and two campaign stars for the Afghanistan Campaign Medal. Reflecting on it all, Sgt. Shrestha told me that one of the greatest days of his life was the day he completed his basic combat training, walked across the stage, and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in front of several family members and 200 of his comrades.

This year, Sgt. Shrestha decided to push himself further. A few months ago, he competed in the Best Warrior Competition in Fort Lee, Virginia, with 24 fellow soldiers and noncommissioned officers. The four-day competition required mastering a variety of physical fitness events, knowledge of military topics, rifle marksmanship, land navigation, and other battle drills. The top soldier and noncommissioned officer received recognition for their mental and physical strength in the competition. In preparation, Sgt. Shrestha endured countless hours of training, many with his young wife Elisha. She was also an exchange student from Nepal, and is now taking on the dual tasks of supporting her husband and pursuing her own education.

When he came to the U.S., Sgt. Shrestha chose to go to Bellevue University, thanks to some connections he had in Nebraska. He lived in Bellevue for three years and completed his Bachelor's Degree in Computer Information Science online while serving in Afghanistan. Next month, he will start Officer Candidate School to become an Army Officer, and hopes to one day earn a Master's Degree in computer engineering. His enthusiasm is contagious. All during our conversation, he kept using the Army's signature saying "hooah." Heard, understood, acknowledged, or "hooah" for short.

If you would have the chance to meet this young man, your heart would be lifted and your faith in the country restored. Sergeant Shrestha represents the highest ideals of American values, even though he was not born here. He strove to come here and made a better life for himself. He has committed himself to service above self and has excelled. All of us in Nebraska can be proud of our adopted native son, Sgt. Saral Shrestha.