

Mr. Ronald Brownie

NSU Online and Continuing Education

U.S. Navy

“Education never ends. You should always go to school.”

Command Master Chief Jackson’s words impressed young U.S. Navy recruit Ronald Brownie.

“I thought, ‘Maybe he’s right about that.’ I started taking all kinds of classes at almost every duty station, from firefighting to astrophysics.”

Brownie, 51, director of online and continuing education at Northern State University, eventually earned an associate’s degree in business administration from Quincy College, Quincy, Mass.; bachelor’s degree from Embury-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla.; and master’s degree from Chapman University, Orange, Calif.

Having completed nearly all his studies while on active duty, Brownie has a personal understanding of the challenges and benefits of balancing military service - deployments, military duties, jobs – with higher education. Online education is “a huge benefit” to people who need to be mobile while learning – military or civilian, he said.

“As long as you’ve got connectivity to the internet, you can continue your education. That offers a lot more freedom, whatever your life circumstances may happen to be.”

Brownie said online education gives students access, but doesn’t make it easy.

“I did all my degrees with a wife, three kids, military deployment and duties, but I had to give up a lot in their younger years. It’s a choice you have to make.”

Brownie, who has worked at schools with more than 80,000 students (Purdue) to fewer than 4,000 (Northern), said smaller schools are more concerned about their students’ success. Larger schools love student success – but will let go of students who are struggling, he said.

“Here at Northern, if you’re not successful, we proactively go after you and say, ‘How can we help you?’”

Brownie called Northern’s efforts toward retaining students through graduation “inspiring.”

“I’ve never seen a school that’s so willing to commit resources and provide students with proactive feedback to ensure success,” he said.

Northern also works to ensure military students' credits will transfer, Brownie added. If a service member starts a degree program with Northern, gets relocated and takes courses at another school, Northern will accept transfer credits from that other school.

"That was one of the big challenges for me, as I attended nine different college and universities over my career," said Brownie. "That's usually a big problem for service members – to consolidate everything and still graduate in a reasonable amount of time."

Brownie chose the Navy because of a longtime love of the sea and a family friend who was a Navy reservist.

In high school, Brownie was in the Navy ROTC and spent a year on a three-masted schooner from the late 1800s called the Artemis. The boat's owners had refitted the historic craft and planned to offer tours highlighting life on board a sailing ship, and allowed Brownie and his high school buddies to tag along as crew on their trip along the Gulf Coast.

"I had a love for the sea, although as part of my naval career, I was never at sea," Brownie said.

Brownie enlisted in the Navy in January 1981 and retired as an E6 aviation maintenance administration member. As a data analyst, he'd analyze maintenance records, project failure rates and recommend replacement times for components of airplanes: P-3s, antisubmarine warfare aircraft, HE-3s and antisubmarine helicopters. Brownie said his unit was one of the first to perform drug interdiction over the Gulf of Mexico.

Conflicts during Brownie's time in the Navy included Desert Shield/Desert Storm and Grenada.

He was stationed in San Diego Recruit Training Command; the naval training command in Meridian, Miss.; HS85, Alameda Calif.; Patrol Squadron 67, NAS Memphis; NAS South Weymouth, Mass.; and the naval air reserve, Whidbey Island, Wash.

Brownie especially enjoyed his deployments in the Pacific Rim.

"I really enjoyed the time I spent in Japan – the politeness of the culture, the food, the slow pace of life, the people – it's just a really cool place to be."

"I don't regret a day of my career. When I'm in Memphis, I look up some of my old shipmates."

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