

Paige Luebbering will make money off going to college while she's there, but it's way more complicated than that— with a soldier's sacrifices to be made, an officer's skills to be honed, and a wild blue yonder to be explored and mastered.

Luebbering, a 2018 Blair Oaks High School graduate, will leave home in about a month to start six weeks of basic training for the U.S. Air Force, after which she will start her first year at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado.

Prospective attendees of military academies need to apply for and receive proper nominations, and Luebbering received hers from U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill and U.S. Rep. Blaine Luetkemeyer.

McCaskill said in a news release announcing Luebbering's entrance to the academy that exceptional students are nominated and accepted to their respective academies "based on strong records of academic achievement, leadership, community service, and participation in extracurricular activities."

Luebbering founded the Blair Oaks girls golf team, among her other leadership roles and activities — vice president of Future Business Leaders of America, member of Student Council, her class's secretary, four-year basketball player, softball player and part-time worker at Gerbes.

"These students are leaders in their communities, and supporting their dedication to serving our country is one of my great privileges as a Senator," McCaskill said in the news release. "Their hard work and commitment to service has earned them admittance to some of the most prestigious institutions in America — and I'm inspired by their dedication to serve and defend our country's principles and values."

Luebbering said she's known since last year she wanted to be in the Air Force, and she visited the academy's campus near Colorado Springs on a vacation.

The place looked pretty, but it was speaking with cadets there that really sold it to her. She said the leadership opportunities impressed her "to be physically and mentally prepared for anything that comes your way."

She added there are leadership opportunities at other colleges, too, but the academy set itself apart to her.

"Everyone wants to do good, but there's different levels of involvement," she said of the chance to be a leader, "a big deal" for her.

Luebbering comes from a military family. Her dad, Tim, served in the U.S. Navy on a submarine, and her mom, Diane, traveled with her husband while he was in the service.

"It's a hard lifestyle," Diane admitted. Their oldest child, Paige's elder sister, was born while Tim was in service, though neither she nor Paige's elder brother have served.

"As parents, it's hard," Diane said of knowing Paige will ship out soon. "We're going to miss her."

However, she said she's extremely proud of her daughter. "I know she has a lot of potential."

Paige, too, admits the sacrifice of time she'll make to serve the country, with an oath to serve at least six years in the military after attending the academy.

"That's a long time I won't be home very often," she said, though she thinks the opportunities will outweigh the disadvantages.

Her dream job in the Air Force is to fly a B-2 bomber — "the sleekest out of all of them" — in which case, she might not ultimately be that far from home, given most of the U.S.'s B-2 force is stationed in Missouri at Whiteman Air Force Base.

B-2s can carry conventional or nuclear weapons. The B-2 also is a stealth bomber, with "reduced infrared, acoustic, electromagnetic, visual and radar signatures. These signatures make it difficult for sophisticated defensive systems to detect, track and engage the B-2," according to the Air Force.

Luebbering said she'd like to major in aerospace at the academy, something that matches her interests in math and science. She'd also perhaps like to work with drones, which she said she's familiar with as unmanned aerial spy vehicles or a concept as a package delivery system — though drones have been used by the United States to carry out targeted airstrikes that have killed thousands of militants around the world, along with varying counts of civilians.

"I really want to leave an impact on this country and what's going on with the world," Luebbering said of wanting to be among the pioneers in drone technology.

The Air Force in March retired its operational fleet of MQ-1 Predator drones, according to the Air Force Times. The Predator's successor, the already-in-use MQ-9 Reaper, is capable of increased speed and carrying more bombs and missiles, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

The Air Force Academy last week graduated a class of 984 new lieutenants — with "more than 500 headed to aircrew jobs, with 417 set to pilot planes and 69 headed for drones," according to the Colorado Springs Gazette's coverage of the ceremony.

However, the graduation's keynote speaker, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said, "Your primary weapons system now is your attitude."

Life at the academy for Luebbering — especially in her first year — will be competitive and spartan. More than 200 members of the academy's class of 2018 dropped out from among the more than 1,200 members who arrived.

Luebbering said no civilian clothing is allowed for first-year cadets, even inside their "minimal"

dorms that won't have the usual decorative trappings of other college dorms.

Diane said all Paige will take with her to basic training will be boots and a backpack with just a few pairs of essential clothing items in it.

Paige said the ratio of men to women at the academy is about 70 to 30, but added, "I don't think that part will bug me as much."

She said she'll earn about \$200 a month in pay after expenses, with everything she needs already being provided for her.

She plans on making a career of the Air Force, if she likes it. There are some other Air Force perks she's looking forward to: "They have

great golf courses, and I love to golf."

Information on the application process and requirements for service

academy nominations is available from the offices of Sens. McCaskill and Roy Blunt at [mccaskill.senate.gov/services/students/academy](http://mccaskill.senate.gov/services/students/academy) and [blunt.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/academy-application-process](http://blunt.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/academy-application-process).

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