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Above, in the fictional country of Atlantica, Anna Laura Grant (left) and another student portraying nongovernmental organization personnel had to negotiate with military leaders to operate in the country.

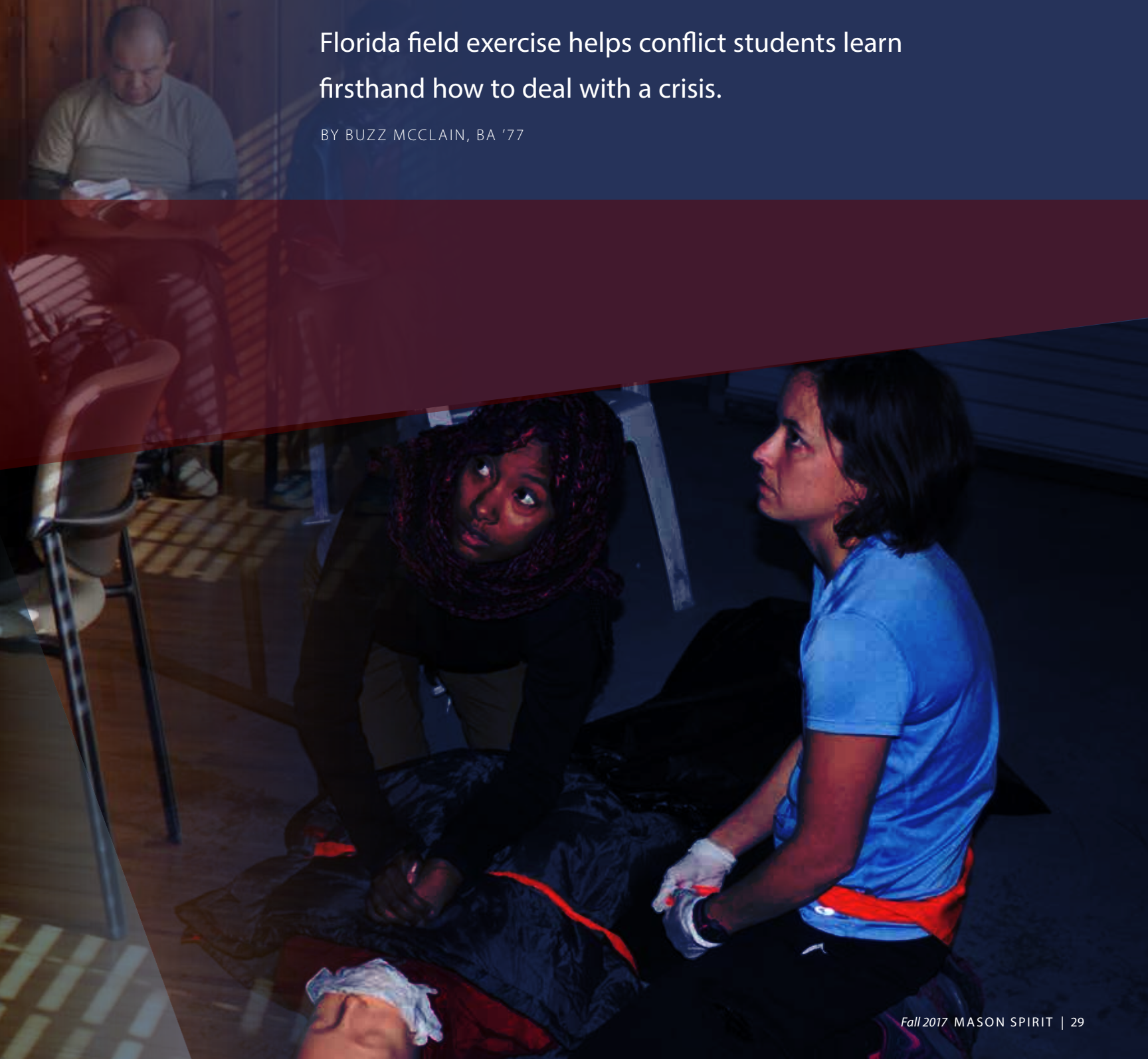
Right, “emergencies” complicated the scenario during the simulation.

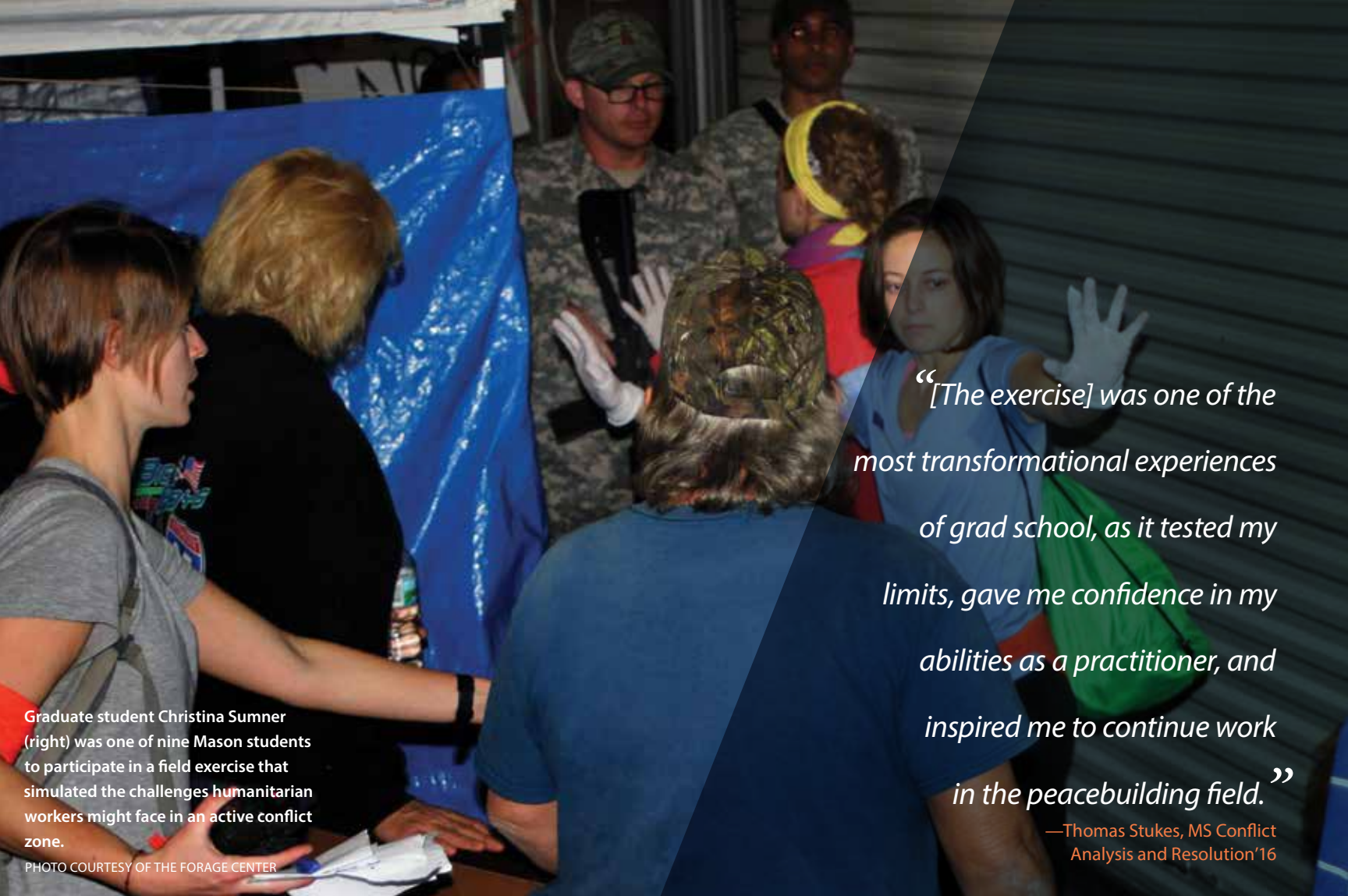
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simulated disaster, real understanding

Florida field exercise helps conflict students learn firsthand how to deal with a crisis.

BY BUZZ MCCLAIN, BA '77





Graduate student Christina Sumner (right) was one of nine Mason students to participate in a field exercise that simulated the challenges humanitarian workers might face in an active conflict zone.

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“[The exercise] was one of the most transformational experiences of grad school, as it tested my limits, gave me confidence in my abilities as a practitioner, and inspired me to continue work in the peacebuilding field.”

—Thomas Stukes, MS Conflict Analysis and Resolution '16

In March, while many college students were enjoying Florida beaches, George Mason University graduate student Anna Laura Grant, also in Florida, was dining on rice and beans, and sleeping—when she could—on the concrete floor of an airplane hangar.

Spring break from hell? Not exactly. For four days, Grant and other graduate students from Mason’s School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution took part in a mentally and physically challenging field exercise designed to show them what it was like to be peace practitioners in an active conflict zone.

“You keep reminding yourself it’s only a simulation, but it wasn’t always easy,” says Grant, who is working on her master’s degree in conflict analysis and resolution. “I would tell myself, ‘We just got yelled at by the director of the humanitarian project, but it’s OK.’ ”

The simulation took place at a compound in the city of Fellsmere on the east coast of Florida. Some 70 participants, including Mason students, local residents, and members of the U.S. Army’s 436th Civil Affairs Battalion, role-played officials,

soldiers, and residents of “Atlantica,” a fictitious country mired in a civil war. As tensions between the industrial north and the rural south turned violent, the population reeled from the imagined devastation of a Category 4 hurricane.

Nine Mason students and about 20 students from other universities—Tulane, Kennesaw State, Wayne State, and Nova Southeastern—were plunged into this volatile mix, taking on roles of humanitarian aid workers from a nongovernmental organization (NGO).

Students alternated roles so they could learn how to set up an IDP (internally displaced person) camp, negotiate with imposing authorities, and, in general, help reduce the conflicts inherent in a fast-changing crisis.

In one exercise, an aid worker was taken hostage at a road stop. Then there was a cholera outbreak at the camp.

“They really tried to replicate the real-life scenarios that people might experience in the field,” says Grant.

The field exercise is a program of the Forage Center for Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Education, whose president, **David J. Smith**, MS Conflict Analysis and Resolution '09, is a Mason adjunct professor. Forage conducts these exercises twice a year, and Mason students have participated since 2013.

“The skills acquired during the experience are valuable to a range of conflict-sensitive jobs, not only overseas but in the U.S.,” says Smith, who has worked in the peacebuilding field for more than 30 years. “The aptitudes developed—teamwork, assessment, engaging effectively with groups in crisis, staying on task, and managing stress—can be applied in many occupations.”

The program was developed in response to a 2010 report by the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., which Smith co-wrote.

“The report noted that employers were looking for applicants that had field experience and could manage projects and execute initiatives, often under trying conditions,” says Smith. “The exercise was developed to respond to that need by employers.”

And the exercise is trying. The students work under stress with little rest, without cell phones or showers, sleeping in sleeping bags in an airplane hangar ventilated by noisy fans.

The experience is a game-changer for students, and Smith says it is designed to be.

“We try to give the texture of what it is like to be deployed overseas,” he says. “Some realize this kind of work is not for them. For most it solidifies their commitment and they are ready to take their careers to the next level.”

In Atlantica, Grant negotiated terms with military leaders to gain permission for her NGO to operate in their country, a task that in real life can be fraught with danger. In the end, they signed the documents.

“You’re trying to be compassionate and get your job done and not get caught up too much in failures, because basically everything is designed for you to fail,” says Grant. “You experience the real challenges of being in the field.”

Grant gained insight into her leadership skills and crisis response skills, and discovered strengths she didn’t know she had.

“They told us not to make any major life decisions during the exercise and I’ve kind of followed that, but it has directly impacted me,” she says. “It was one of the most powerful experiences I’ve had at Mason.”

Program “alumni” share Grant’s impressions.

“Overall, the most challenging part of the exercise is always the constant layer of tension between group members, external actors, and the situations you face,” says **Thomas Stukes**, MS Conflict Analysis and Resolution '16.

Stukes also found negotiations one of the most challenging tasks. “The most memorable role I played was negotiating a truce between our NGO and the ‘rebel group,’ which was a really stressful experience because they had confronted us with weapons.”

After completing the exercise and graduating from Mason, Stukes began working for the Forage Center, where among his many duties he manages the operations during the exercise.

“[The exercise] was one of the most transformational experiences of grad school, as it tested my limits, gave me confidence in my abilities as a practitioner, and inspired me to continue work in the peacebuilding field,” Stukes says. “It also taught me how extensive peacebuilding is—it runs through almost every field you can think of. If there is conflict somewhere, there is a need for someone there to resolve it.”

Colleen Kearney Rich, MFA '95, contributed to this story.

IN THE FIELD

William Johnson, MS Conflict Analysis and Resolution '16, was already working as a program officer for a Washington, D.C., NGO when he took part in the Forage exercise in 2016, and he says the experience helped him hone his career trajectory.

“This program helped me decide that I’d like to start gradually transitioning to the humanitarian and emergency response side of foreign assistance programming,” he says.

Johnson currently supports a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded project in Afghanistan aimed at building the capacity of the country’s Ministry of Higher Education. He recently served as a consultant to a humanitarian organization based in Erbil, Iraq.