

Greenville Journal

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The true patriots

A week at war provides fresh insight into the U.S. military



MARK B. JOHNSTON
PUBLISHER

Forty-two hours aboard a C-17 aircraft, six on massive MH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters.

Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the Horn of Africa in seven days.

I was one of 45 who took part in the 72nd class of the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference, which has been hosted each year since 1947 by the Department of Defense. The conference offers civic leaders from around the nation the opportunity to see every branch of the armed forces at work.

I knew it would be a chance for the military and the Bush administration to get their war message out to the people – without the static of the national press corps. Four of the folks on the trip were media professionals – editors and columnists from Greenville to Philadelphia.

But the message I took home was not a cheerleading chant for the war. It was that the military is in the capable hands of men and women of great character and ability.

The leaders could easily run any Fortune 500 company. Vice Admiral Patrick Walsh briefed us on naval operations in the Middle East. A Tailhook Pilot of the Year, he was wingman for the Blue Angels. He flew combat mis-

Greenville residents Mark Johnston of Community Journals and Jimmy Orders of Park Place Corporation took part in the U.S. Department of Defense Joint Civilian Orientation Conference Oct. 15 to Oct. 22.



BOARDING: JCOC participants board a transport helo as they prepare to depart Army training base Dagger, 90 miles north of Kuwait City, Kuwait.

Mark Johnston/Staff

sions during Operation Desert Storm. He holds a master's degree in diplomacy law and a doctorate – an amazing background and representative of the leaders we met.

Our soldiers are sharp and polite. They look you in the eye when they talk to you. They stand tall. They speak with authority.

There was Capt. Mike "Sheriff" Walley

aboard the USS Iwo Jima. Capt. Walley didn't spend much time showing off his fleet of troop transport Sea Stallion helicopters or his awesome array of Harriers or the impressive \$23 million amphibious hovercraft that transport our Marines in combat missions.

Instead, the Sheriff, a nickname he earned capturing drug runners in El Paso, spent See **PATRIOTS, PG 8**

Men and mission

BY **JIMMY ORDERS**
contributing writer

AS THE SUN rose over Washington, D.C., the JCOC team boarded our C-17 that would shadow us for a week, and headed east.

Sixteen hours later, after an in-flight refueling by a KC-135, we landed in Manama, Bahrain. Traveling with the military has its advantages. With security clearances pre-arranged, there were no delays at any of the airports.

The next seven days were a steady procession of knowledge-building exercises about the U.S. military. This included hands-on experience with the Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force, Army and Marines.

The modern military is all-volunteer. Today's commanders would have it no other way. The people we were with were incredibly impressive. We saw no one "stuck" in the military as John Kerry is fond of saying these days.

What we did see were highly motivated men and women who understand their mission and are pursuing it each day with a level of professionalism and enthusiasm that any employer would find attractive.

On that side of the Atlantic, the military mission is very clear. Stars & Stripes includes front-page news of the latest casualties, but unlike most traditional publications, it also includes stories of interest about the military and humanitarian successes we are having.

Our time was largely spent with en- See **MISSION, PG 9**

PATRIOTS CONTINUED FROM COVER...

part of our tour in his ship's hospital and operating room, proudly recounting his crew's humanitarian relief efforts during Hurricane Katrina.

His staff and crew helped more injured and distressed people in one month than an average month at all three New Orleans hospitals combined during normal operations (they were all out of commission due to the hurricane).

There were the Coast Guard patrol boat captains in Bahrain who proudly described their role in protecting the Iraqi shore. They primarily guard the oil platforms just off the coast, which provide the revenue so crucial to keeping what exists of the Iraqi economy going.

One young sailor escorting me on a tour of his patrol boat stopped and showed me a series of sonograms of his yet-to-be-born daughter. He found out he was going to be a father while he was at sea. And that child, his first, would be born before he returned home. As a father of four sons I couldn't imagine not being there for the birth of a child.

Aboard the MH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters, gunship operators showed battle-ready focus in protecting us as we boarded and as we were shuttled from base to base. At that point, it became clear to me we were in harm's way – not just on some junket – and the military was taking it seriously.

My most intimate experience was participating in an exercise with a convoy of Humvees over a three-mile expanse of road to identify and eradicate the most potent weapon system our soldiers face today – the improvised explosive device, also known as booby traps that are explosives made from whatever is at hand: explosives alone or a combination of toxic chemicals, biological toxins, or radiological material.

The soldiers in my vehicle were Sergeant First Class Jack Robison and his team from D Company, 9th Infantry Regiment. Robison's previous assignment was as a drill instructor at Fort Jackson just outside Columbia.

He was in the final stages of training before being deployed to Iraq. I asked if he knew where he was going to be sent. In a few days, he would head into harm's way in a hot zone just north of Baghdad. The area was "hot" with an increased level of rocket-propelled grenade attacks and IED activity. This was his first combat tour. I sensed no anxiety or trepidation whatsoever.

Since the trip was organized and facilitated by the Public Affairs Office at the Department of Defense, every facility was prepped. The willingness of the generals and commanders to share of themselves and their roles was extraordinary.

There were briefings from the military's top leadership at the Pentagon. A question-and-answer period was conducted by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the start of our trip.

But our access to the troops was unfettered everywhere we went. We ate breakfast and lunch side by side with patriotic men and women. They accompanied us on the planes, helicopters and buses.

During each evening reception and dinner, the commanders made sure enlisted personnel were there to

answer any questions about who they were, where they were from, and how they thought things were going.

It would be a fair assessment to bill the entire experience as one big public relations operation by the U.S. military. But it was during these times with the rank and file of the American military that the true message came through:

We know why we are here.

We volunteered to be here.

We know what we must do.

We are getting it done.

I wanted to hear firsthand how the soldiers felt about the media's representation of the war and if that made them feel discouraged. They knew what was being reported. They knew some believe we

Africa, one of six commands that oversee activities throughout the world.

Centcom is made up primarily of the "stans" – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, etc, as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and hotbeds such as Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Syria.

At the beginning of our trip, in our briefing at the Pentagon, Admiral Edmund Giambastiani Jr., the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was most proud of the nation's volunteer armed services.

I couldn't agree more.

As impressive as the technology, leadership, mid-air refueling, the Humvee IED training exercises, night vision goggle exercises, live fire training – including a .50 caliber sniper rifle that literally shakes the ground when fired – it was the soldiers, sailors,



DESERT HEAT: A convoy prepares for an IED-detection training exercise conducted at Army training base Dallas in Kuwait. Pictured are Mark Johnston and Specialist Javier Torrez.

are losing the war on terror – but they said with great confidence the military does its job.

I have grown increasingly concerned with what I perceived to be a clear disconnect between the challenges and reality of the situation and what has been reported on back home. The majority of messages, sound bites and headlines Americans see and hear on the Global War on Terror continue to offer dismal assessments.

But this war ought to be called the Global War on Evil. It is a complex and complicated mission. And it has been distorted by politics and most media. But not for our soldiers. To them, it is a mission bolstered by duty. It is a calling.

Let me say that again. To a soldier, from privates to three- and four-star admirals and generals, this war has nothing to do with politics.

The men and women of the American armed forces are positive, motivated, self-confident and self-assured. I came away with a much better understanding of how the war is being fought and how specifically we are going about fighting it (many of the details I cannot disclose).

These were the people of the U.S. Central Command whose area of responsibility was primarily the Middle East and the Horn of

airmen and Marines who I will remember most.

I don't know what I or the others in our group expected, but the interaction with these Americans – these true patriots – is what impressed us all.

Charlie Freericks, a developer from Scottsdale, Ariz., was boarding a bus after our visit with the troops in Qatar.

He said, "If I meet one more 20-something that's more mature than I am, I'm going home!"

The Global War On Terror is 60 months old and counting. World War II spread over more than 3 years.

It's been a long road. A tough road. But these men and women don't whine.

I could not be more proud of them. As an American with great pride in my country, I am humbled by their bravery and patriotism.

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www.jcoc.dod.mil
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listed people in some form or fashion. They were either taking us through a Humvee rollover demonstration, or teaching us to shoot a .50 caliber sniper rifle.

They showed us how to wear body armor, why you need wool gloves when it is 110 degrees in the desert (because the metal you touch will burn your hands), how to man a turret-mounted machine gun on a Humvee without making yourself sniper bait and how to make the most of an MRE (meals ready to eat) for lunch.

One of the hardest lessons for me to grasp had to do with the concept of escalation of force. Our soldiers have strict rules for applying force. In an urban battlefield, this is a real challenge. I am 54 years old and have never made a life-and-death decision in my life. Our soldiers are barely out of their teens and make these decisions daily in the battle theater. It is no small thing.

The traditional war that we waged against Iraq resulted in regime change. The asymmetrical war we are now fighting against insurgents is a different matter. Our military understands the difference and is adapting to the circumstances. In talking with various commanders, it was clear that they are



Mark Johnston/Staff

ON DECK: Jimmy Orders aboard aircraft carrier USS Iwo Jima.

focused on the military mission while the political debate is left to others to decide.

I asked several commanders the same question: "What does victory look like in the war against terror?" The best answer I received was, "Victory is another day without a new 9/11 event on U.S. soil."

The terrorist groups (and there are clearly many different groups out there) are desperately seeking a state sponsor so that they can rebuild their organizations. The last stop on our trip was a scheduled visit to Ethiopia. Unfortunately, the threat level was such that we got no closer than Djibouti.

Africa is seeing a large influx of bad guys clearly seeking a weak nation-state that they can overrun. Walking the streets of a small village in Djibouti, it is not difficult to see how hard men with weapons could have their way.

What can the average American do? Pray for our political and military servants, especially the leaders who are tasked with making critical decisions.

Go to www.americasupportsyou.mil. Vote when given the opportunity to do so.

May God bless our amazing men and women in the military!