



MEMORANDUM

TO: National Officers, National Council of Administration, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Senior Vice Commanders, Department Junior Vice Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

FROM: Keith E. Harman, Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief *Keith E. Harman*

DATE: October 13-23, 2015

RE: SHAPE – NATO – Germany – Trip Report

OVERVIEW

My first overseas fact finding trip as Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief was to Europe from Oct. 13-23, 2015. The purpose was to gain familiarity with the missions, organizations, challenges and concerns of U.S. forces stationed in Europe. In Belgium I met with senior leaders at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and NATO, and in Germany with U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command, and subordinate Army and Air Force Commands. I also had the opportunity to meet with the troops, as well as with a number of VFW comrades and their families.

I was accompanied by Robert E. Wallace, Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office. Our escort in Germany was John Leffler, Junior Vice Commander, VFW Department of Europe.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

The troops are concerned. They are concerned about the size of the force and whether there will be a place for them should they decide to make the military a career. They are concerned about quality of life programs, their families, and the future of the GI Bill and its transferability provision. And their leaders are very concerned about uncertain budgets

and the possible return of mandatory sequestration. The subsequent passage of a two-year budget deal will provide some stability, but sequestration will still be the law of the land afterwards.

There was also a widespread concern that many elected and appointed leaders in Washington just didn't understand today's military, or the fact that their operations tempo has not slowed down, or that they are continually tasked to do more with less.

The value and importance of the NATO Alliance and having a forward presence in Europe was voiced by a number of service members, because what few Americans stateside understand is that in terms of strength, capability, reliability and leadership, *the U.S. is NATO.*

We received many questions about VA benefits, and we stressed the fact that all should file a VA claim before leaving the military if they have any type of service-related health issues. This is because it is far easier to correct personnel and medical records while in uniform, and extremely difficult afterwards.

We also took every opportunity to talk the VFW story, about our many support programs for military personnel, veterans, and their families. We said we will incorporate their concerns into our Congressional testimonies and policy positions, and emphasized at every meeting that the VFW is their voice in Washington, and that we will always have their backs while they are serving and afterwards when they become veterans.

I was very pleased that a number of them were already VFW members, and urged those who were not to join.

BELGIUM

Two hours after arriving in Brussels we traveled to the Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial, which is one of 25 overseas American cemeteries maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission. National Officers routinely lay VFW wreathes at overseas cemeteries to show our respect to those who served and fell, but visiting Flanders Field was personal. My VFW Post 3035 is named after two World War I soldiers, one of whom, Army Pfc. Claude L. Walterick, is buried in Flanders Field. He was KIA on Oct. 31, 1918, just 11 days short of the Armistice.

The six-acre cemetery grounds are immaculate, and we were told every grave was adopted by local Belgium families, who visit on a regular basis to place flowers on the gravesites of "their" Doughboys. The adoption program is their way to recognize and remember 368 brave American soldiers, as well as the 43 MIAs, who died to keep the Belgium people free. This is truly a very powerful message of respect for the American soldier and their sacrifices. Additional information about the Flanders Field Cemetery and others can be found on the ABMC website at <http://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials#.Vo6SuU03NMw>.

The next day we visited Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), where we met a number of U.S. military personnel and received a command briefing from Navy Cmdr. Raul Eliza, who discussed military cooperation and partnership agreements with NATO and non-NATO nations, as well as quality of life issues. In addition, we discussed the current world situation and how SHAPE and NATO fit into same, and the effects of sequestration on training and readiness. We also discussed Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo and Afghanistan, as well as ISIL.

SHAPE commands NATO's military forces, and its mission is "to prepare for, plan and conduct military operations in order to meet Alliance political objectives." It also develops military policy and operational plans, and training between NATO partners is constant in order to forge better understandings and interoperability. SHAPE is a team concept with other nations.

We were also briefed by Military Partnership Directorate Liaison Jim Hoover. We were very interested in the new Very High Readiness Taskforce that was formed as a result of the Russia's involvement in the Crimea. Taskforce responsibility rotates between NATO member countries, and forces must be prepared to deploy on a moment's notice. We also had a very interesting lunch discussion with four senior officers about the world situation as they see it, especially the Russian threat. For more information about SHAPE, go to www.shape.nato.int.

The next day was at NATO Headquarters, where we received current issues briefings. We met with Quinn Wofford, Defense Policy Advisor to the U.S. Mission to NATO, as well as Lee Litzenberger, its Deputy Permanent Representative, and Chief of Staff Col. Kevin Marcus. We discussed NATO's role in Europe and the world, as well as Afghanistan, Syria, the Ukraine, and the continued challenges of combating terrorism. NATO is a political and military alliance of sovereign states, and Article Five of the NATO Agreement states that any attack on one member nation is considered an attack on all.

NATO nations are concerned about terrorism, nuclear-biological threats, cyber security and human trafficking, among many other issues. Sequestration and an uncertain U.S. budget environment, as well as the tight budgets our NATO Allies are facing, was discussed, as was the need for continued active U.S. involvement in NATO. The work of NATO is accomplished on a committee basis, which means our military personnel assigned to NATO must not only be top notch military professionals, but also top notch diplomats. We then lunched with four enlisted service members, headed by Senior Enlisted Advisor MSgt. Daniel Cruz, to discuss the issues and concerns that have already been mentioned. Learn more about the U.S. Mission to NATO at <http://nato.usmission.gov/mission/index.html>.

GERMANY

The next day we traveled to Berlin, where we were met by members of VFW Post 10506. We spent the day with them, and were later hosted to a dinner with a number of comrades, who we were able to talk with and hear their concerns. During the Cold War, membership

in the VFW was not an issue because the U.S. had significant forces in and around Berlin. All that changed after the Wall came down in 1989, however. Now the Post has significant recruiting challenges, much like VFW Posts next to now-closed military installations everywhere. Their hospitality was sincerely appreciated.

Then we flew to Nuremberg, where we linked up with John Leffler, the VFW Department of Europe Junior Vice Commander, who was our escort for the remainder of our stay in Germany. Our first stop was Grafenwoehr, where we learned of the great work VFW Post 10692 does for the Grafenwoehr military community, which encompasses the Joint Multinational Training Command (JMTC), which we toured the next day.

The mission of JMTC is to train U.S. forces, NATO partner nations, and other nations in support of U.S. Army Europe and U.S. European Command. U.S. Africa Command also uses the facility to train some of their international partners. A large part of the training is conducted in a simulated environment, which is very cost-effective, plus training can be visually adapted to different environments and situations. I had the opportunity to learn how Humvee drivers are taught to watch out for civilians while scanning for IEDs. We also visited the Gunfighter's Gym, where I participated in a simulated range environment. Participants who miss targets have to do 10 pushups for each target missed, so they work hard not to miss!

Sixty percent of the trainees are U.S. soldiers and the rest are from NATO partners and other nations. The command trains for an uncertain future, and has a number of specialized training centers, to include Special Forces. Their NCO Academy has graduated more than 1,000 service members from NATO and international partner nations.

U.S. Garrison Bavaria, which includes Grafenwoehr, is considered the Crown Jewel of Europe, but the constant push to keep doing more with less resources is a concern I understand has been repeated to many of my predecessor Junior Vice Commanders-in-Chief during their visits.

We met with Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Todd to discuss the opportunities as well as challenges the Army Garrison and its soldiers face. Aside from budget and quality of life concerns already mentioned is a need to make the Transition Assistance Program process more seamless for separating soldiers, as well as to improve health care, increase suicide prevention, and combat military sexual trauma. We had lunch with a number of soldiers and toured some of their housing facilities. Our lunch discussion with soldiers was very open and frank. The opportunity to spend some time discussing their issues and concerns was very beneficial to me. Learn more information about JMTC at <http://www.eur.army.mil/JMTC/>.

We were hosted to a dinner by members of VFW Post 10810 in Stuttgart that evening. The interaction with fellow comrades was very positive and always appreciated.

The next day we visited U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command. At EUCOM we received an operations briefing from Navy Cmdr. Scott "Spill" Smith,

followed by a meeting with Navy Rear Adm. John Smith, EUCOM's Chief of Staff. We discussed Turkey, Israel, Russia and Syria, as well as the migration issue, which is being handled by the European Union. Sequestration, Russia, terrorism, missile defense and the operations tempo were also discussed. Our meeting with Admiral Smith was very positive. Learn more about EUCOM at <http://www.eucom.mil/>.

We then had lunch with a number of service members assigned to AFRICOM and discussed their concerns, which have been previously discussed. We again took advantage of telling the VFW story and answering any questions they had.

Our next meeting was with the AFRICOM Chief of Staff, Air Force Maj. Gen. Michael Kingsley. AFRICOM conducts joint military training with a number of African nations to promote cooperation and understanding. The Rule of Law, lack of infrastructure, health, and normal quality of life issues are lacking in many parts of the continent. Terrorism, as well as drugs and human trafficking, are also high-interest issues on the continent. The general highlighted the work U.S. military performed in Liberia during the Ebola crisis, and said the mission built trust with local populations and showed America's willingness to assist in humanitarian missions.

In response to the Benghazi attack in 2012, the U.S. now has rapid response forces available to protect U.S. embassies and citizens. A Marine Air Ground Task Force is located in Spain, plus the Army has a battalion-size force in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. There are also a number of Special Operations missions on the continent to help train partner nations in the military critical areas of command, control and communications.

We then met with Director of Resources Mike Maxwell and Quality of Life Advisor John Shoupe. We asked if there was a way the VFW could provide some quality of life enhancements for deployed troops. They appreciated the offer and will get back to us if an opportunity surfaces. We also met with Air Force Colonel Gillen to discuss force protection, military health, and preventive medical actions the command takes for service members being deployed to the African continent. We departed with a much better understanding and appreciation of AFRICOM and their mission, and made a commitment to help them spread word about the good work they do every day. Learn more about AFRICOM at www.africom.mil.

The next day we visited Ramstein Air Base in Kaiserslautern, which is home to U.S. Air Forces Europe and Air Forces Africa where we received command briefings.

At USAFE we the opportunity discuss previously addressed quality of life issues and concerns with Command Chief Master Sgt. James Davis. We also hosted a luncheon with a number of airmen to listen to their concerns, and to discuss what the VFW does for all service members, veterans and their families, as well as the importance of filing a VA claim before they separate or retire from the military. Learn more at <http://www.usafe.af.mil/>.

Next we traveled to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center for a meeting with its commander, Col. James Laterza, and Command Sgt. Maj. Antez Gilbert, followed by a tour of the facility and meeting a few patients. Landstuhl is in the process of reaching out to more military retirees as they move from a war footing to a more traditional medical facility. We also discussed plans for the replacement Medical Center, which is scheduled to be operational in 2022.

I have a much greater appreciation for this very special facility because many injured service members from Iraq and Afghanistan are alive today because of the excellent care Landstuhl provided, which was why the VFW honored it with our 2012 Armed Forces Award. Learn more at <http://ermc.amedd.army.mil/landstuhl/index.cfm>.

The last stop of the day was to one of Landstuhl's Fisher Houses, where we were met by manager Vivian Wilson. Fisher House provides a complimentary place for family members to stay while their loved ones receive medical care. I was very impressed with the work the Fisher House performs for the families of our service members.

We next traveled to Wiesbaden, home of the U.S. Army Europe, where we were briefed on the command's mission and current operations by Col. Bill Williams. Our escort officer for the visit was Captain Deal.

Stressed throughout the briefing was the joint training conducted with NATO partners, our interoperability with those partners, and the relationships that have been built. To ensure information sharing as well as our commitment to Europe, the USAREUR Chief of Staff is a German army brigadier general.

We discussed the challenges faced by the command, especially with the unpredictable nature of Russia. A U.S. presence in Europe gives us strategic access to many parts of the world, and we cannot afford to lose the long standing relationships we have with our NATO partners. The forward presence is also vital to the security of our own homeland. We had the opportunity to tour the Mission Command Center, which maintains a constant vigil over European and world issues. I was very impressed with this state of the art facility.

We discussed quality of life issues with Alan Belya, chief of plans and policy, and added to the list of previously mentioned concerns was the impact of alcohol overconsumption by the force. We met with the Medical Clinic director Lt. Col. LaShanda Cobbs and a number of her staff, as well as toured the clinic. We had lunch with a number of soldiers and discussed their concerns as well as highlighted for them what our VFW does for service members, veterans and their families. We stressed our many programs, especially National Veterans Service, Legislative Service and Military Service, as well as discussed the VFW/Sports Clips Scholarship program. Our last meeting was with Garrison Command Sgt. Maj. Larry Addington, who added to the list of quality of life issues and concerns the lack of military housing, and the expense and cultural challenges of living off-base. Learn more about U.S. Army Europe at <http://www.eur.army.mil/default.asp>.

That evening the comrades of VFW Post 27 hosted us for dinner, where we had the opportunity to talk VFW issues with them as well as answer any questions they had. We returned to the U.S. the next day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks and appreciation to Department of Defense and State staff who made this trip a reality, as well as all the service members and civilian personnel we had the opportunity to meet to discuss the challenges that they—and we as a nation—face in Europe.

In Belgium, to Flanders Field cemetery caretaker Patrick Lernout, cemetery superintendent Christopher Arsenault, and to Carl Hale, a VFW comrade and NATO employee who met us upon arriving in Brussels and accompanied us on our visit to the cemetery.

In Germany, to VFW Post 10506 in Berlin, VFW Post 10692 in Grafenwoehr, VFW Post 10810 in Stuttgart, VFW Post 27 in Wiesbaden, and to all their members and families for the hospitality and comradery. And to VFW Department of Europe Junior Vice Commander John Leffler for an outstanding escort job. I look forward to serving with him as we ascend through the chairs.

There is no doubt that the United States of America has the most professional military in the world. Our job as VFW members is to ensure they have the proper equipment, are properly resourced, that their quality of life programs are the best, and perhaps most of all, that they continue to have the full support of the American people.

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