




MEMORANDUM

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

FROM: B.J. Lawrence, Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief 

DATE: December 7, 2016

RE: Trip Report: SHAPE – USNATO – Germany

OVERVIEW

My first overseas fact-finding trip as Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief was to Europe from Oct. 11-21, 2016. The purpose was to gain familiarity with the missions, organizations, challenges, opportunities 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 many VFW comrades and their families.

I was accompanied by Joe Davis, VFW Director of Communications, Publications and Public Affairs, and in Germany by Dave Morgan, Junior Vice Commander, VFW Department of Europe.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

The troops and their leaders remain concerned. They are concerned about the size of the force, about arbitrary budget decisions that don't take into consideration those who are forward deployed, about the lack of a national strategy that should be more proactive instead of reactive, and about an operations tempo that is higher than it was a decade ago.

Military leaders are concerned about the return of mandatory sequestration in 2017, which despite a two-year respite still resulted in troop-strength reductions and less than adequate budgets for forward-deployed commands who are fully engaged in an uncertain and dangerous world that has U.S. forces more operationally committed but with less in-theater forces.

The troops are seeing a noticeable lessening of quality of life programs, ranging from an Army Installations Management Command attempt to cut MWR budgets by 60 percent across-the-board, to include overseas programs where there are no realistic alternatives outside the gate, to a newly renovated Child Care Center that is closed due to outdated civilian personnel hiring rules.

The troops, however, remain focused, their morale is high, and so is their interest in learning more about VFW's many troop and family support programs, to include Unmet Needs, our scholarships, our sponsorships of on-base awards recognition programs, and the expert claims assistance we provide to separating or retiring personnel.

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 to learn a number of military personnel were already VFW members, and I urged those who were not to consider joining. I was also very pleased to hear that our VFW Posts in Germany were very active in their communities.

BELGIUM

Immediately after arriving in Brussels we traveled about an hour away to present a VFW wreath at the Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial. We were given a tour of the six-acre site by new cemetery superintendent Chris Arsenault, and were joined by Carl Hale, deputy director for Operations and Programs at USNATO, and Steve Bradshaw, who was soon to retire as the U.S. Representative to the NATO Investment Committee. Both are life members of VFW Post 605 in Paris, France.

Flanders Field is one of 25 overseas American cemeteries maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission, and is the only American World War I cemetery in Belgium. The cemetery grounds are immaculate, and every grave has been 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), which is about an hour southwest of Brussels. We met a number of U.S. military personnel and received briefings by Army Col. Lee Flemming, the Base Support Group commander, Air Force Col. Johnathan Hughes, the U.S. National Military Representative to SHAPE, and Military Partnership Directorate Liaison Jim Hoover. Our discussions focused on military cooperation and partnership agreements with NATO and non-NATO nations, operational challenges, and quality of life issues.

SHAPE commands NATO’s military forces. It also develops military policy, operational plans and training between NATO partners to forge better understanding and interoperability. We discussed the current world situation and how their mission was influenced by Russia, Iran, and the threat of an expanding ISIS on their southern border as well as by infiltration through the refugee flow.

SHAPE is a team concept with other nations, yet it was stressed throughout that only the very best American officers and NCOs should be assigned to SHAPE and/or USNATO. Everyone must be authorities in their respective military specialties as well as tactful diplomats, especially when dealing with countries without the wherewithal of the United States.

Three quality of life issues emerged:

- the budget threat to Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) programs and facilities;
- the need to better screen Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) participants before they are assigned overseas; and
- the need to expand Military Family Life Counselor visits.

The SHAPE garrison falls under the U.S. Army Installation Management Command (IMCOM), which had earlier mandated a 60-percent across-the-board reduction to MWR budgets on every Army installation. After an understandable uproar from the force, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter halted the reduction for it to be reviewed. The potential cuts are very disconcerting to troops and their families stationed abroad, where there are no suitable substitutes, such as fitness centers, child care centers, and English-language libraries and movie theaters outside the main gate. As was stressed everywhere, “*MWR matters overseas!*”

EFMP families are also very hard to serve in overseas areas, in that special needs programs readily available stateside just don’t exist in many overseas locations. This puts an extra

hardship on special needs families as well as on their commanders, who must weigh family considerations against mission requirements.

Similarly, Military Family Life Counselors need to visit Belgium more often. The country is modern, but SHAPE is remote, especially when compared to other European duty assignments, like Germany, where more Americans are stationed. Traveling mental health counselors provide an invaluable service to assigned military families.

The TRICARE overseas program is very good, and so is the on-base American school, which hosts an Air Force JROTC program that is the best in Europe. Our hats off to their instructors, retired Air Force Lt. Col. John Arias and CMSgt. Jose Lopes!

For more information about SHAPE, go to www.shape.nato.int.

The next day we received current issues briefings at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. We met with Steve Mirr, Defense Policy Advisor to the U.S. Mission to NATO, received a NATO overview briefing by Col. Phil Rogers, plus discussed internal and external communications issues with Deputy Defense Advisor Jim Hursch, and Public Affairs Advisor Jack Hillmeyer and his deputy, Jaffar Diab.

We discussed NATO's role in Europe and the world, as well as Afghanistan, Syria, the Ukraine, and the continued challenges of combating terrorism and cyber terrorism. NATO is a political and military alliance of 28 sovereign states, soon to expand to 29 with the admittance of Montenegro. The key to NATO is reaching consensus among the 28 member nations, and that means the Americans assigned must be subject-matter authorities as well as defense diplomats.

Other big issues include the need for all member nations to take ownership of their own airspace, shared costs, and European Union (EU) initiatives to halt unregulated migration and human trafficking.

As part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, the U.S. has an Armored Brigade Combat Team on six to nine-month rotations in Poland, and as a further deterrent to potential Russian aggression, the U.K., Canada and Germany each have thousand-man battalions stationed in the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. American fighter aircraft also provide air policing over the Baltic States. In addition, the U.S. has Aegis Ashore missile defense units deployed in Poland and Romania to deter and defeat an ICBM launch from Iran or elsewhere.

The overall NATO budget in FY 2016 was roughly 600 million Euros, of which the U.S. paid approximately 22 percent, followed by Germany (15 percent), France (11 percent), the U.K. (10 percent) and Italy (8 percent). The big initiative is to get all 28 member nations to commit at minimum 2 percent of GDP to their respective defense programs over the next decade. Only five nations do so or more today (the U.S., U.K., Estonia, Greece and Poland).

Regarding the EU, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, patrols the Mediterranean waters with the hope of stemming the unregulated migration of refugees and human trafficking from northern African and the Middle East. As explained, the EU is responsible for the continent's counterterrorism mission while NATO performs the military mission, but NATO is concerned that the EU might unintentionally start something it is not equipped to handle, so NATO is increasing its cooperation with the military branch of the European Union in part to reassure members of the shared interests of both organizations. Six EU members are not NATO members (Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Sweden).

As repeated numerous times during the trips taken by my predecessors, NATO works best when America leads, but whatever the mission or objective, the American viewpoint is Europe must want it more than the U.S.

We hosted a lunch for 12 enlisted service members, headed by Senior Enlisted Advisor MSgt. Daniel Cruz, to discuss issues and concerns. One such issue was from a single military mother who pointed out that the DOD school recently began opening an hour late on Mondays so teachers could conduct in-house training. This impacts families more than teachers, so the issue has been forwarded to the Defense Department's Educational Activity. The suggested remedy is to move the teacher training to the end of the day.

Learn more about the U.S. Mission to NATO at <https://nato.usmission.gov/> .

GERMANY

The next day we traveled to Berlin, where we were met by members of VFW Post 10506 and hosted to dinner. During the Cold War, membership was not an issue because of the large number of American troops stationed in and around Berlin, but all that changed after the Wall came down in 1989. Now the Post has significant recruiting challenges, much like VFW Posts next to former military installations stateside. The Post does assist the American Consulate by providing service officer assistance to veterans and their widows who retired in Berlin. Their hospitality was sincerely appreciated.

We then flew to Nuremberg, where we linked up with Dave Morgan, the VFW Department of Europe Junior Vice Commander, who was our escort for the remainder of our stay in Germany. Our first stop was with U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria in Grafenwoehr, where we learned of the great work VFW Post 10692 does for the assigned military community in the 7th Army Training Command and its Joint Multinational Training Command (JMTC), which we toured the next day.

As briefed by Chief of Staff Col. Clark Linder, the 7th ATC's operational goal is to make 30,000 soldiers look like 300,000 soldiers. This is achieved through joint training and tactics with NATO member countries, as well as other countries in NATO's Partnership for Peace initiative. The mission of JMTC is to train U.S. forces, NATO partners, 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 forces from their partner nations. A large part of the training is conducted in a simulated environment, which is very cost-effective. JMTC is the only training center of its kind, and among its unique features is it owns the airspace up to 30,000 feet, which allows the employment of multiple munitions and aircraft.

Over the past year, 52 percent of JMTC trainees were U.S. soldiers and the rest were from NATO partners and other nations. The command trains for an uncertain future. U.S. Garrison Bavaria, which encompasses Grafenwoehr, may be considered the Crown Jewel of Europe, but the constant push to keep doing more with less resources is a concern that has been repeated to many of my predecessors during their visits. The Army's high operations tempo has not abated, but now there are fewer soldiers, which means less dwell time between rotations.

On quality of life concerns, Colonel Lindner said the MWR cuts are on strategic hold pending the DOD review, but he reiterated how important these programs are to soldiers and their families in a forward-deployed area.

In the Mission Command Directorate, we met with Lt. Col. Brent Fogleman, Maj. Carlo Avergas and Carl Lester to learn about their virtual battlespace simulators. At the Training Support Activity-Europe, we met with operations specialist James East, who discussed JMTC's support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, which is a demonstration of America's continued commitment to collective security in response to Russia's involvement in the Ukraine. Then we visited with deputy range operations director Bob Shoemaker to learn that JMTC has 40 direct fire ranges for crew-served weapons such as tanks and artillery.

We hosted six soldiers to lunch and learned that retaining current MWR programs was a huge concern, as was mental wellness and the new military retirement plan, which is set to start in January 2018. The command had just lost three soldiers to suicide in the past three weeks due to marital problems and a recent transfer. We discussed the Army's ongoing resiliency program as well as the VFW's Mental Wellness Campaign. Another concern is force protection due to refugee resettlement decisions by the German government. Our lunch discussion with the soldiers was very open and very beneficial.

Learn more information about JMTC at <http://www.eur.army.mil/JMTC/>.

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

The next day we visited U.S. European Command at Patch Barracks and U.S. Africa Command at Kelley Barracks. At EUCOM we were briefed by Chief of Staff Rear Adm. John Smith, Navy Capt. Danny Hernandez, EUCOM's Public Affairs Officer, and Deputy Political Advisor Tony Carpenter. Last year the command's focus was Russia-Russia-Russia, but now it's Russia-Turkey-ISIS. Following the fall of the Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, EUCOM's near two-decade posture of peace and assurance has been forced into a deterrence posture, with Russia continuing to be a wild card, and the deterrent forces

deployed forward for Operation Atlantic Resolve can only at best be referred to as speedbumps.

The attempted military coup in Turkey in July caught everyone by surprise. An assignment there is now a one-year unaccompanied remote, and the military families who were all evacuated have been sent either home or on to their military member's next duty assignments. Defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq is the mission, because its threat to Europe is very real. Regarding the budget, the continuing resolution is a given, which the military can and will adapt. On the commemorative side, a lot of events are being planned to commemorate the centennial of World War I, but along with the mass gatherings comes the potential threat to security.

Learn more about EUCOM at <http://www.eucom.mil/>.

We then toured the Patch Clinic with Army Lt. Col. Markus Lee. The clinic recently finished a major interior renovation, but it is still too small, space-wise, to effectively serve an eligible population of more than 10,000. The clinic has taken the initiative to hire locally instead of waiting on Army civilian personnel to fill positions. We then hosted a lunch for eight service members and discussed their concerns, which included the DOD school curriculum not being challenging enough for students. We again took advantage of telling the VFW story and answering any questions they had.

Our next meeting was at Kelley Barracks with the AFRICOM Chief of Staff, Army Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier, and Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Stitzel. AFRICOM is an operational command that is very busy tracking down bad guys and training others to do the same. Africa is the world's second largest continent, and AFRICOM's mission is to conduct joint military training with partner nations to promote cooperation and understanding, as well as to combat terrorism and human and illegal drug trafficking. 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 in Spain, plus U.S. forces are stationed on a rotational basis in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. There are also a number of Special Forces missions on the continent to help train partner nations in the critical military areas of command, control and communications.

Regarding quality of life issues, the general said AFRICOM recently diverted \$1 million of its operations money to renovate the gym because IMCOM wouldn't fund the project. That is totally unacceptable, and further illustrates the lack of understanding of how important MWR programs are in overseas/forward deployed areas. We also learned that of the four Army installations in the Stuttgart area, only two had Warrior Zones, which are high-tech recreation centers meant to provide more entertainment to young soldiers residing on base. Kelley Barracks did not have a Warrior Zone, but it does have two child development centers. Both the general and CSM were surprised by the announced MWR cuts, but very interested in hearing about the VFW Unmet Needs and scholarships programs, as well as our service officer claims assistance.

Learn more about AFRICOM at www.africom.mil.

We then departed for Ramstein Air Base in Kaiserslautern, which is home to U.S. Air Forces Europe/Air Forces Africa. We were joined for dinner by George Gilgore of VFW Post 10614 to discuss challenges in Europe.

The next day we visited with Air Force Maj. Gen. Timothy Zadalis, who's dual-hatted as the vice commander of USAFE and Air Forces Africa, and Jerry Renne, Public Affairs Officer, and were given a mission briefing by Col. Dave Pollmiller, Chief of Staff.

At USAFE/AFAFRICA we heard all the issues and concerns previously discussed, and the continued challenges of doing more and more with less personnel and budget uncertainties. Because of the budget, the general remains very worried about properly taking care of the people who take care of the mission. He was very appreciative of us being their voice on Capitol Hill.

Regarding the budget, it is widely believed throughout the military that Congress does not understand what it means to serve in a military that continues to fight a two-front war for more than 15 years, nor do lawmakers recognize the other threats that exist. The military believes there is simply a lack of national strategy. Everyone recognizes that Congress wants some semblance of fiscal responsibility, but it can't come off the backs of the troops or the combatant commands who are in execute mode.

Here, too, we hosted a luncheon with 14 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 commander Col. James Laterza, and Command Sgt. Maj. Gilbert, followed by a tour of the facility. Landstuhl is in the process of reaching out to some 4,000 military retirees as the hospital moves from a war footing to a more traditional medical facility. We also discussed plans for the new \$1.3 billion Landstuhl Medical Center, which is scheduled to be fully operational by 2023 adjacent to Ramstein AB. Because all new construction projects require host nation approval, the new Landstuhl does not yet come with parking, a Child Development Center or a Fisher House, which all exist at the current location.

Many injured service members from Iraq and Afghanistan are alive today because of the excellent care Landstuhl provides, which is why the VFW honored it with our 2012 Armed Forces Award. In fact, American and coalition forces had a 99.4-percent survival rate once they arrived at Landstuhl. Learn more at <http://ermc.amedd.army.mil/landstuhl/index.cfm>.

We then toured one of Landstuhl's Fisher Houses, where we were met by manager Vivian Wilson. Since 2001, Fisher House has provided a complimentary place to stay to more than 17,500 family members of injured servicemen and women. I was very impressed with the work the Fisher House performs for the families of our service members.

Our last stop of the day was with the new Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's European Detachment at nearby Miesau Army Depot. There we met with director Niall Brannigan and his deputy, Air Force Lt. Col. Chris Moeller. This DPAA unit is tasked with the fullest possible accounting of some 27,500 missing Americans in the World War II European and Mediterranean theaters. Only an estimated 8,000 might be recoverable.

The U.S. had stopped searching for MIAs in Europe in 1951, but restarted in 2009 after Congress inserted a requirement of 200 identifications per year on what is now DPAA. This detachment is expected to average about 10 recovery operations and 10 investigation missions per year in its April-October weather window. The detachment also expects to increase the number of unknown disinterments from 20 this year to 50. I was proud that the VFW was the first veterans service organization to meet them on their own turf.

We then traveled to Wiesbaden, home of the U.S. Army Europe, where we were briefed on the command's mission and current operations, as well as visited USAREUR's mission, command and control center. Stressed throughout was the joint training conducted with NATO partners. We discussed the challenges faced by the command, especially with the unpredictable nature of Russia, as well as the security challenges from having nearly one million new refugees in Germany.

We met with Garrison Commander Col. Todd Fish and CSM Larry Addington, both life members of local VFW Post 27. Due to refugee resettlements, they are concerned with force protection, as well as housing shortages and family support programs. We discussed the VFW Mental Wellness Campaign, as well as our Burger King-supported Unmet Needs programs and SportClips scholarship program, among many others.

We discussed quality of life issues with Alan Blyea, deputy chief of the Readiness and Resiliency Division, who added to the list of previously mentioned concerns the impact of alcohol overconsumption by the force.

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 military issues with them as well as answer any questions they had. We departed the next morning to Frankfurt, where we caught our flight home the next day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

In Belgium, to new Flanders Fields cemetery caretaker Chris Arsenault, and fellow VFW Post 605 life members Carl Hale and Steve Bradshaw, who welcomed us to the political-military world that is NATO.

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 most especially to VFW Department of Europe Junior Vice Commander Dave Martin for an outstanding escort job. I look forward to serving with him as we ascend through the chairs.

The United States of America has the most professional military in the world because of the high quality of the people who raise their right hands and swear an oath of allegiance few have or will ever take. Our job as VFW members is to ensure they have the proper equipment, are properly resourced, that their quality of life programs remain first-class. And, perhaps most of all, that they continue to have the full support of the American people.

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