



## 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: William J. "Doc" Schmitz, Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief

DATE: August 21, 2017

RE: Trip Report: SHAPE – USNATO – Germany

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### OVERVIEW

My first overseas fact-finding trip as Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief was to Europe from Aug. 1-11, 2017. 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 troops, as well as many VFW comrades and their families.

I was accompanied by Bob Wallace, Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office, and Sarah Maples, VFW Director of National Security and Foreign Affairs. In Belgium, I was also assisted by Carl Hale, Deputy Director, Operations, Programs and Security (Management) at NATO, and in Germany by James Joyce, Inspector, VFW Department of Europe, Junior Vice, District 3, and Tower Post 10692 All-American Commander.

## **BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT**

The troops and their leaders remain concerned about a variety of issues. The size and composition of the force, the short and long term impacts of insufficient and unpredictable funding, Russia's malign influence in the region and the threat it poses to U.S. forces and our NATO allies and partner nations, and an increasing operations tempo top their list.

The impacts of sequestration, compounded by repeated continuing resolutions, have resulted in a force that is stretched thin, operating with outdated equipment, and in facilities dearly in need of maintenance. Years of reducing the footprint of U.S. forces in Europe is also making it challenging for the remaining installations and units to meet the needs of the increasing personnel entering the theater and to meet the threat posed by Russia and violent extremist organizations.

Availability of quality on-base housing, access to medical care – specifically after hours and in urgent and emergency situations, childcare staffing and availability, and the implementation of the new Blended Retirement System were key areas of concern for the troops and their families. Despite these concerns, they are focused; their morale is high.

They were very interested 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 took every opportunity to tell the VFW story, and assured the service members that we are their voice in Washington. They were particularly appreciative of VFW's efforts in securing the passage of the "Forever GI Bill" legislation.

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

## **BELGIUM**

Shortly after arriving in Brussels, we traveled about an hour away to present a wreath at the Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial. We were greeted by cemetery superintendent Chris Arsenault, and were joined by Carl Hale, deputy director for Operations and Programs at USNATO, and Chuck Steiner, both life members of VFW Post 605 in Paris, France. The ceremony was accompanied by an honor guard comprised of U.S. service members.

Flanders Field is one of 25 overseas American cemeteries maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission, and the only American World War I cemetery in Belgium. Situated on a former battlefield where the U.S. 91st Division suffered extensive casualties, the cemetery holds 368 American military dead and honors another 43 missing.

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 following 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 from Army Col. Kurt Connell, the U.S. Army Garrison (USAG) Benelux Commander, Air Force Col. Max Weems, the U.S. National Military Representative to SHAPE, Army Lt. Col. Steven Williams, Deputy 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 recent developments with Russia and the increased demands on NATO.



*Presenting an award to USAG Benelux.*

While we were heartened to hear that some of the quality of life issues from previous years, such as screening of Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) participants, had improved, other quality of life issues remained. Availability and condition of on-base family housing was a particular concern, as off-base housing can be isolating and expensive, as well as presents force protection concerns.

We hosted a lunch for service members, where we listened to their concerns about the new Blended Retirement System, as well as issues specific to being stationed in Belgium. On behalf of VFW Post 605 in Paris, I presented an award to USAG Benelux for their unit's continued support of VFW memorial events and ceremonies throughout Europe.



*Ready for an interview with Armed Forces Network.*

Our final stop was at Armed Forces Network Benelux for an interview, where I had a chance to discuss what VFW does for Active Duty, Guard and Reserve Component service members, veterans, and their families.

For more information about SHAPE, go to [www.shape.nato.int](http://www.shape.nato.int).

The next day we received current issues briefings at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. We met with Ms. Julie Fischer, Charge D’Affairs; James Hursch, Acting Defense Advisor to the U.S. Mission to NATO; Vice Admiral John Christenson, U.S. Military Representative to NATO; Ms. Barbara Sisson, SES, Commander, Headquarters Army Element, Air Force Col. Dirk Driggers, Deputy Commander, Headquarters Army Element, and Master Sgt. Kelli Thompson, Senior Enlisted Advisor, Headquarters Army Element. We also received a Defense Plans briefing from Eva Shinagel, Deputy Director of Defense Policy and Plans, an operations briefing from Cdr. Stephen Johnson, and an update on communications strategy from Amanda Johnson, acting Public Affairs Advisor.

NATO, a political and military alliance of 29 sovereign states, is a key deterrent against Russia and violent extremist organizations. During our visit to their headquarters, we



*Visiting with service members is key to understanding their concerns.*

discussed NATO’s role in Europe and the world, the U.S. contribution to NATO missions, how recent events have increased demands on NATO, and the current focus on burden-sharing and counterterrorism. Other big issues include the regeneration of old skillsets, such as moving heavy armor across borders, the maintenance of long-standing missions, including Afghanistan and Kosovo, and the importance of America retaining its leadership role, and the need to provide a consistent strategy and messaging.

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, as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence. American fighter aircraft also provide air policing over the Baltic States. In addition, the U.S. has Aegis Ashore

missile defense units deployed in Romania, and is installing additional units in Poland to deter and defeat an ICBM launch.

We hosted a lunch for enlisted service members, headed by Senior Enlisted Advisor Master Sgt. Kelli Thompson, to discuss issues and concerns. Housing was once again raised as an issue.

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



## GERMANY

The next day we traveled to Nuremberg, where we were met by James Joyce, Inspector, VFW Department of Europe, Junior Vice, District 3, and Tower Post 10692 All-American Commander, who was our escort for the remainder of the stay. We stayed overnight before moving on to begin our tour of German-based units.

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 attended the 59th Annual German-American Volksfest. Started in 1957, the festival has been held every year except 2013, when it was canceled due to sequestration. A large carnival-like event, it drew more than 105,000 German and American visitors for fun and friendship. Featuring entertainment, rides, food, and German and U.S. static displays, the event is key to maintaining strong ties between the host-nation and U.S. communities.



*Hearing details of the 59th Annual Volksfest from the MWR Director.*



*Trying out the Gunfighter Gym.*

U.S. Army Garrison Grafenwoehr, redesignated as U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria in 2013, overseas Army installations in Grafenwoehr, Vilseck, Hohenfels and Garmisch. Among the units housed at USAG Bavaria is 7th Army Training Command, which prepares forces to execute Unified Land Operations and contingencies in support of the Combatant Commands, NATO, and other national requirements. In FY18 alone, they will conduct 57 exercises. A fully expeditionary training team, it includes the Joint Multinational Simulation Center, which trains command and control using cost-effective virtual, gaming and constructive training, and the Gunfighter Gym, which allows soldiers to shoot and engage targets in a 220-degree virtual environment.

Key exercises include SABER GUARDIAN, an umbrella of seven national exercises, which take place in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Involving more than 25,000 service members from more than 20 ally and partner nations, it is a premier opportunity to improve operability and build readiness to support the security and stability of the Black Sea Region. They also oversee Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U), the U.S. training mission being conducted in support of Ukrainian forces. As with a number of U.S. missions in Europe, the JMTG-U is staffed primarily by National Guard forces.

In January, Grafenwoehr began welcoming Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF). RAF are designed to provide Combatant Commanders with tailored, responsive, and consistently available Army Forces. Assigned to Graf for nine months at a time, their arrival has challenged available installation resources. Assigned the Spartan facilities with limited WiFi, their situation has caused consternation among military families, who have become used to continuous and almost immediate contact with their soldiers.

We hosted several soldiers to lunch and learned that they are facing some of the same concerns expressed previously in Belgium, with regards to access to urgent and after-hours care. Another point of discussion was the new military retirement plan, which starts in January 2018, and the feeling that the training DOD is providing is not effectively preparing current soldiers with less than 12 years of service to choose between the new system and the legacy system. Our lunch discussion with the soldiers was very open and very beneficial.

Learn more information about 7th ATC at <http://www.eur.army.mil/7ATC/>.

We then departed for Stuttgart, where we were hosted to a dinner by John Leffler, Department of Europe Commander, and members of VFW Post 10810. The interaction with fellow comrades was very positive and always appreciated.

The next day we visited U.S. Africa Command at Kelley Barracks and U.S. European Command at Patch Barracks. At Kelley Barracks we met with the AFRICOM Chief of Staff, Army Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier. AFRICOM is an operational command that faces unique challenges in its Area of Responsibility. Africa is the world's second largest continent. Requiring almost nine hours to fly from one side of the continent to the other, it provides a number of logistical challenges for U.S. forces, particularly with medical evacuations. AFRICOM's mission, which is to conduct joint military training with partner nations to promote cooperation and understanding, as well as to combat violent extremist organizations and illegal human and drug trafficking, has become more kinetic in the last year, with the air campaign in Libya and strikes in Somalia. Additional challenges include potential cuts to State Department funding, as USAID and non-government organizations provide crucial assistance to U.S. forces on the continent, and the increased presence of Russian and Chinese forces, including the opening of China's first overseas base just miles from where U.S. forces are stationed on a rotational basis in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa.

Regarding quality of life issues, lack of space and aging facilities are an ongoing issue. Limited parking, outdated facilities that are expensive to upgrade, a shortage of almost 175,000 square feet of office space, as well as power, heating, water, and sewer issues, distract from the mission, and are a further demonstration of the damage that sequestration and Congressional unwillingness to pass a comprehensive and sufficient budget have caused. Lack of weekend and urgent care medical services was once again mentioned here, as was insufficient behavioral health care. The command did praise the use of virtual healthcare, stating that it had reduced some of the burden by allowing initial appointments to be conducted via teleconference.

For those individuals who are transitioning or retiring, there is no onsite assistance for filing disability claims, and all related medical appointments must be conducted at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, more than two hours away, which requires multiple trips away from duty station, all of which have to be funded by the command.

For those soldiers being forward-deployed to the African continent, there are additional challenges for them and their families, such as host nation and embassy culture adjustments. As a solution, AFRICOM has developed the “AFRICOM Families Forward” program. Previously, soldiers would report to AFRICOM HQ in Stuttgart for orientation before meeting their families in Africa. Under the new program, families accompany their soldiers to AFRICOM HQ and receive a similar orientation before departing for the continent together.

We had a wonderful lunch at AFRICOM with Active Duty and Reserve Component service members and veterans.

Learn more about AFRICOM at [www.africom.mil](http://www.africom.mil).

We then departed for EUCOM, where we were briefed by Chief of Staff Rear Adm. John Smith. The conversation once again turned to Russia’s malign influence and its impact on U.S. forces and strategy. Following the fall of the Berlin 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. Admiral Smith echoed



*A piece of the Berlin Wall reminds us of the importance of EUCOM’s mission.*

what we had heard at NATO about the importance of stability in U.S. strategy and messaging.

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

We then departed for Ramstein Air Base in Kaiserslautern, which is home to U.S. Air Forces Europe (USAFE)/Air Forces Africa (AFAFRICA).

The next day we visited with Air Force Maj. Gen. Timothy Fay, who's dual-hatted as the vice commander of USAFE-AFFRICA, and Senior Enlisted Advisor Chief Master Sgt. George Anderson. We were given a mission briefing by Col. Dave Pollmiller, Chief of Staff, a quality of life and MWR briefing by Mr. Mark Maxfield, and a budget update by Col. George Tombe.

At USAFE/AFAFRICA the combined impact of sequestration and continuing resolutions were once again brought home, with the additional mention of how "catastrophic" the return of sequestration would be for a force that is already too small for the missions it is tasked to accomplish. A 75% reduction since 1991 in available aircraft, with a corresponding increase in the age of the aircraft, combined with a 57% reduction of available personnel, has stressed the limits of the "less with less" concept. The critical pilot shortage, as well as the lack of the right mix of skillsets in the maintenance, analyst, and linguist career fields, were also discussed.

MWR funding continues to be a challenge, with funding being cut to even lower levels than last year. While USAFE/AFAFRICA has not had to cut any program in full, every program has felt some pinch. Childcare, as mentioned at other installations, continues to be a concern. Although Air Force fully funds Child Development Centers (CDCs) through central funding mechanisms, waiting lists--comprised of up to as many as one hundred people, such as at RAF Lakenheath--continue due staffing difficulties. This is primarily due to the delay in completing new employee background checks, which can take up to six months.

Here, too, we hosted a luncheon with 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. They were very engaged in the discussion and expressed the same gratitude as General Fay with regards to the new GI Bill legislation.

Learn more at <http://www.usafe.af.mil/>.





*Learning about Fisher House.*

Next we traveled to Landstuhl to tour one of Landstuhl's Fisher Houses, where we were met by assistant manager Lisa Britton and Col. Eric Newland, Deputy Commander for Administration Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. Since 2001, Fisher House has provided a complimentary place to stay to more than 18,550 family members of injured servicemen and women, including 1,100 already this year. Families served come from the U.S. European Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Africa Command and the 72 Embassies in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, to include our NATO allies. At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fisher House tended to a number of families visiting individuals wounded on the battlefields. Now that the flow of wounded has slowed, families at Fisher House often include those with infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. I was very impressed with the work the Fisher House performs for the families of our service members.

We then walked over to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center for a meeting with its commander, Col. Timothy Hudson, and Command Sgt. Maj. Clark Charpentier, followed by a tour of the facility. Landstuhl is the only bedded facility in Europe and has capabilities in 56 medical specialties, serving 205,000 beneficiaries and approximately 46,000 outpatient visits each month, Primary Care Managers are in high demand. 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.



*Touring Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.*

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>.

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, his deputy, Air Force Lt. Col. Chris Moeller, and staff member, Rengert Elburg. 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 averages about 10 recovery operations and 10 investigation missions per year in its April-October weather window. Recent recoveries have included B-24 sites from Croatia and Slovenia. The detachment is also looking at disinterring unknowns from a cemetery in Tunisia, where there are more than 200 buried. We also discussed the current situation with Russia and how the POW/MIA mission has historically been a place where our two countries could collaborate, regardless of tensions.

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.

We discussed quality of life issues with Alan Belyea, deputy chief of the Readiness and Resiliency Division, who discussed the command's suicide and sexual assault prevention efforts. He mentioned that he had recently attended the joint DOD/VA Suicide Prevention Conference in Denver and found it to be very helpful and that they would be incorporating several tools from the conference into their suicide prevention efforts going forward.

We had lunch with a number of soldiers, where we discussed topics such as the limited healthy eating choices available on the installation.

We ended our visit with Mr. Doug Earle, USAG Wiesbaden Deputy Commander. He discussed the housing situation on the installation, as well as the difficulty in meeting the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, mandate under the current contract.

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 Flanders Field cemetery caretaker Chris Arsenault, and fellow VFW Post 605 life members Carl Hale, who welcomed us to the political-military world that is NATO, and to Chuck Steiner.

In Germany, to 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 Inspector James Joyce for an outstanding escort job.

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.

-vfw-