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LTG Brooks sends farewell

Troops, Families and Army Civilians of the famous Third Army / U.S. Army Central --

As this is my last Desert Vision commentary to you I want to start by saying thanks, in advance, for a great send off for Carol and me. Our time with the Third Army has come to an end. We will forever remember the challenges faced and the faces of those meeting the challenges. Remember, we make history, every day, by just doing our duty. You made history. The opportunity to continue serving in the Army as a commanding general, and especially doing so at the four-star level, is a credit to you and all you did. As I have said to several of you regarding the four-star rank -- "I wear it . . . you share it!"

Looking back over the past two years, during a time of increasing tension throughout the Middle East and Central/South Asia with the political and social changes sweeping the regions and the need to reassure our friends on one hand while deterring our adversaries -- and the adversaries of our friends -- on the other, we can know that we have been on the playing field of a new era. Truly, you are America's land force professionals, experts in the Middle East and Central Asia.

You turned our campaign plan with its five areas of concentration (or lines of effort in mil-speak) READY, SHAPE, SUSTAIN, COMMUNICATE, and TRANSITION, into real progress in each area. You committed to relocating the headquarters from Fort McPherson, Georgia to Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina while becoming immediately and deeply invested in the Sumter -- Midlands community. You operated in a split headquarters -- one command in multiple places -- and were deployed for extended periods, either in long blocks of time or many times over a long period. Either way, you were apart from home and loved ones, serving our Nation with distinction. You have magnificently supported the war fighting effort in Afghanistan and Iraq. You have completed Operation Nickel II, the successful retrograde of U.S. troops and equipment from Iraq -- without there ever being a mountain of metal, and are currently leading the Afghanistan retrograde of personnel and equipment after more than 11 years of "stuff" flowing in with little coming out. In Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia you have shown that your presence makes an immediate difference and is the best way to send the message that America is with her friends. In Jordan and Lebanon you have been a stabilizing partner to the Armed Forces there as they face incredibly heavy burdens due to regional instability. And in places like Egypt, Oman, Yemen, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan you opened doors to a positive future by showing the way to become part of a multi-national team of teams, through exercises committed to peace and stability beyond one's own borders. And, finally, you paved the way for CONUS-based, regionally-aligned forces to extend our reach and to play a role in the region every day. I would say that you have shown how to project U.S. "smart power" into any part of our AOR in order to do any mission that our Nation calls us to do. Well done.

I have been proud to commit you to many of the twenty countries in the CENTCOM AOR, putting you in the right place to show your professionalism and to have that make a significant difference in enhancing the professionalism of other militaries. I like to use the expression to describe what we do as "exporting professionalism" as part of the American military brand. As of the time of this writing, we have a robust, committed, rotational presence in 7 countries, even

after the significant reduction of the total number of Army personnel in the region, and we have conducted over 1,000 security cooperation events. That is quite a shift and it reflects well on the U.S. Army and our ability to be agile, opportunistic and responsive to the operating environment as we help make the Army even more available to the CENTCOM Commander in the years to come. This is historic work, once again, and I do believe it reflects the nature of what the U.S. Army will be called upon to do for the next 20 years of this century. You are already leading the way – of course, given our motto of Third – Always First. But many challenges, and opportunities, remain.

The fiscal reality of the U.S. budget will be a “head-wind” we will have to deal with as we move forward. The situation in Syria will get worse before it gets better. The final “fighting season” has begun in Afghanistan before nation-wide elections that will set the course for the future of Central Asia and South Asia. Many countries are trying to find a peaceful internal balance of meeting the demands for change, the expectations of their populations for representative government, economic solvency, and social direction . . . for the first time. You will have important work to do in the months and years ahead. I know you are up to the task.

As we transition leadership in several key positions, and I particularly want to thank our Deputy CG for Operations, Major General Gary Cheek; and our Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Chuck Taylor for their superb contributions to making us a far better command by their contributions, I would ask you to be mindful of a few things that will demand the best of us. First, thanks for your loyal support under my command. Now, give the same to LTG James Terry the incoming ARCENT CG. Go where he leads you and don't look back. Second, build on the great teamwork that exists within the command and among the components. This is the best I've seen in 33 years of service. Supporting and supported relationships are all about teamwork and we'll need to keep demonstrating great teamwork for the missions that lay ahead in the Levant and in Afghanistan especially. Third, we have to get better in driving away any behaviors that are not based on dignity and respect.

The Army, along with the other branches, faces a public challenge due to the all too frequent examples of behaviors that are not consistent with our values. Sexual assault is a big example of what I mean. Our Soldiers, their Families and the American people are counting on us to lead the way in addressing this problem within our ranks and being an example for our Nation, as we have been many times before on things that needed changing inside, and outside, of our Army. This is a moral imperative and the personal responsibility of everyone in the Third Army / ARCENT team. My orders -- eradicate



KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Lt. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, commanding general, Third Army/U.S. Army Central, speaks with Pfc. Casey McGillvary, 63rd Ordnance Company, Task Force Provider, March 30. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rochelle Krueger, 3rd Sustainment Brigade Public Affairs)

sexual harassment and sexual assault in our ranks. Bottom lines for me on this are:

1. It's wrong, period.
2. We can drive the behavior away and make it stop – nothing is impossible for the U.S. Army.
3. We can build the kind of trust that not only removes the danger of this happening, but also that raises the confidence of every member of the team in knowing that reporting makes a difference, and the team will act appropriately on every report.
4. This is about trust – and so is combat.

I challenge you to meet my standard: ZERO incidents; 100% reporting. You can do it. Again, live up to our motto of Third – Always First!

Thank you, again, for the privilege of serving as your commanding general and to be with you in making the seemingly impossible a matter of historical record. I want to thank the dedicated Army civilians who provide the long-term continuity and technical expertise in our team. Also, I want to thank every Family member who shares a Soldier or a DA Civilian with Third Army / ARCENT. Your sacrifices are too great for us to number and certainly, they are too great for us to repay. We can only say “thanks” because your support makes a difference and makes our service worthwhile. I look forward to hearing about the upcoming exploits of the famous Third Army and it is my great hope that our paths will cross again at some point in the future. Carol joins me in wishing you all a fond farewell.

Third—Always First!

Training at Signal University enables commanders

By Lt. Col. Corey Roen, Signal University Public Affairs

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — Technology is one of the most constantly evolving and influential tools used by militaries across the world today. It can often be challenging to stay proficient through new developments and updates, but help is not far for service members and civilians working at Camp Arifjan who are eligible to enroll at Third Army/U.S. Army Central Command's Signal University.

“The training offered here is vital for all Soldiers,” said Sgt. 1st Class Lacey Howard, noncommissioned officer in charge of the university, who believes that signal training is a key element to being a Soldier.

The Signal University, located in Zone 2, offers a variety of classes focused on keeping military personnel current and proficient in their technological skills. Last year the school graduated over 1,800 students.

“Technology is constantly changing, and with these changes there always seems to be a gap in knowledge,” said Col. Andre Wiley, 335th Signal Command, who has served as guest speaker for graduation. “The solution for ARCENT has been Signal University and the school has been successful. The skills learned here not only benefit the military they also benefit the individual and enhance our ability to fight.”

Soldiers from all career fields gather for a variety of classes. These classes focus on enhancing and expanding the skill sets of the Soldiers entrusted with sustaining the fight and carrying out the mission of Third Army/ARCENT. Although signal training is the primary focus, the curriculum is much broader: Courses at the university include training on the full Microsoft Office suite, fiber optics and more.

To request more information or to register a representative from the school can be reached by calling: (318) 430-5986. ^A



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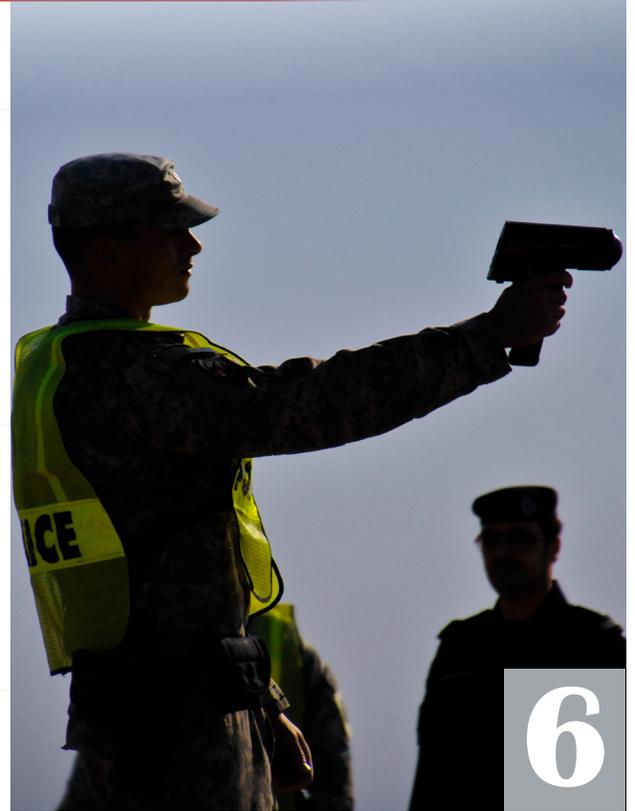
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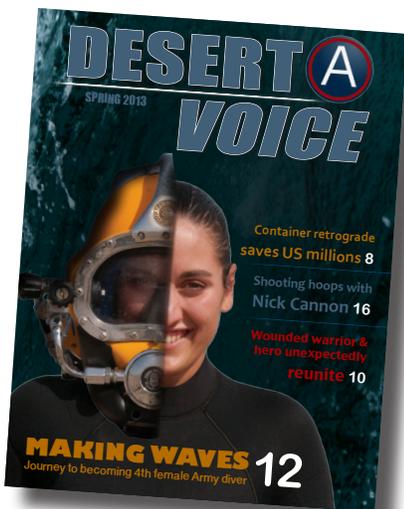
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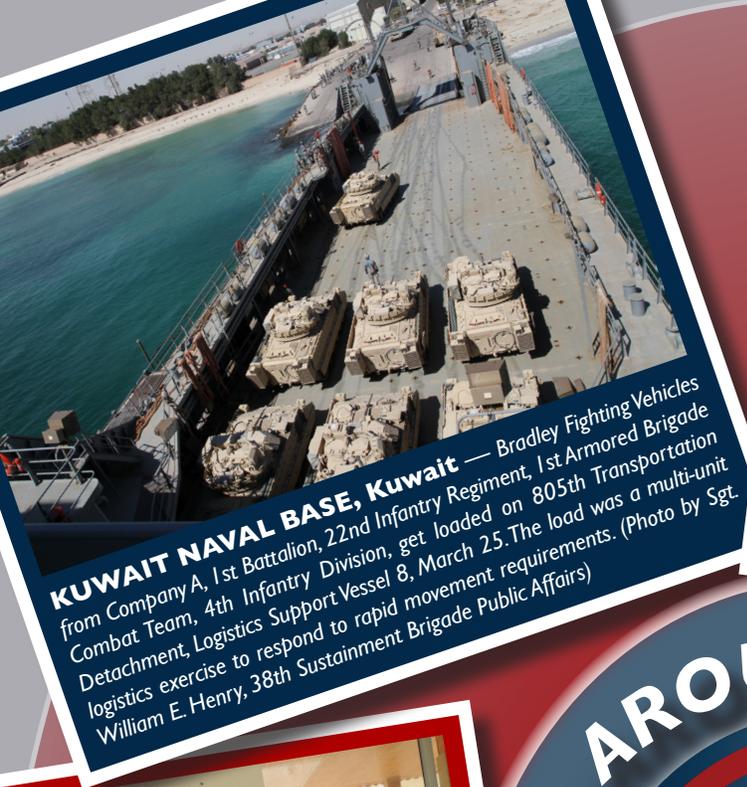
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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

1st Lt. Christie Plackis poses with and without a diving helmet after she charged through adversity to become the fourth female diver in U.S. Army History. (Photos by Sgt. Micah J. VanDyke)



KUWAIT NAVAL BASE, Kuwait — Bradley Fighting Vehicles from Company A, 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, get loaded on 805th Transportation Detachment, Logistics Support Vessel 8, March 25. The load was a multi-unit logistics exercise to respond to rapid movement requirements. (Photo by Sgt. William E. Henry, 38th Sustainment Brigade Public Affairs)



KUWAIT CITY, Kuwait — Maj. Gen. Steven W. Smith, commanding general of 335th Theater Signal Command (Provisional), left, represented the U.S. Army in a ceremony that honored each nation that assisted in the liberation of Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm, Feb. 27. (Courtesy photo)



DOHA, Qatar — A U.S. military marksmanship team consisting of Soldiers and Marines compete in the pistol event of the 2013 Qatar Commander-General Shooting Competition, March 14-18, at the Lusail International Shooting Complex. The team brought home the bronze at the conclusion of the competition. (Photo by Kyla Curtis)

AROUND THE AOR



Jordan — Maj. Gen. Gary H. Cheek, deputy commanding general, Third Army/U.S. Army Central, presents Command Sgt. Maj. Abeer Bni Mustafa, a certificate of appreciation for speaking to a group of U.S. and Jordanian women about challenges faced on her path to becoming the first female command sergeant major in the Jordanian military, at the inaugural Jordan-U.S. Women's History Month Luncheon, March 18. (Photo by Maj. Paul Island, U.S. Central Command Public Affairs)



CAMP BUEHRING, Kuwait — Spc. John Vance, unmanned aerial vehicle mechanic, and UAV operators, Spc. Luke North and Spc. Adam Carpio, all assigned to Company A, 1st Special Troops Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, mount an RQ-7B Shadow 200 UAV onto its launcher prior to a training mission, Feb. 27. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Andrew Ingram, 1st ABCT Public Affairs)



SHAW AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. — U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, center, the commanding general of the Third Army/U.S. Army Central, passes the Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion colors to Lt. Col. Thomas J. Verell, Jr., left, during a change of command ceremony, March 2013. Verell assumed command of Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion from Col. David S. Cannon during the ceremony. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Salcido/Released)

News

US military, Kuwaiti police combat speeding

By Sgt. Ashley M. Outler

CAMP BUEHRING, Kuwait — For some, traveling on barren desert roads is an opportunity to test the limits.

In that moment, they may feel a sense of rebellion. Their adrenaline rising with their speed as they soar over speed bumps, drift around corners and race through the desert.

Unfortunately, their need for speed often ends in sirens followed by a ticket or warning and hopefully not a trip to the hospital.

It is exactly the hope and purpose of the U.S. and Kuwaiti police team supporting 'Operation Roadrunner,' to use its union of forces, experiences and cultures to combat those dangers on the roads of Kuwait.

"Operation Roadrunner is a joint traffic-enforcement between (military police supporting Area Support Group-Kuwait) and the Kuwait Ministry of Interior police," said Sgt. 1st Class Trevor J. Brandenburg, operations noncommissioned officer for the 79th Military Police Company, who has been with the operation since its beginning in October 2012. "It started because we saw a need to make sure everyone was operating their vehicles in a safe manner on the (Alternate Supply Routes) in northern Kuwait."

The operation comes at a time when Kuwait averages 206 traffic accidents a day, mainly due to traveling at speeds over 170 kph (about 100 mph).

"Our part is getting in front of the problem," said Spc. Andrew Romonsky, a military police officer with the 79th MP Company, which is a reserve unit out of Rochester, Minn.

They've worked toward that goal by teaming up for patrols, responding to accidents and combining efforts.

"The most important thing is to help people, not just to give tickets," said Lt.



Sgt. Matthew D. Fabian, dayshift patrol supervisor for the 79th Military Police Company and Sgt. 1st Class Bader Al-Azami, patrol officer with the traffic department of Jahra District, monitor the speed of vehicles traveling on Alternate Supply Route Dallas during Operation Roadrunner.



Spc. Andrew Romonsky, military police officer for the 79th Military Police Company, writes a ticket for a traffic-law violator pulled over on Alternate Supply Route Dallas.



Sgt. 1st Class Eid Nada Al-Azari, patrol officer with the traffic department of Jahra District Police, waits to receive the license and registration of a speeder who he pulled over on Alternate Supply Route Dallas.

Col. Naji O. Al-Rashidi, chief of police for the traffic department of Jahra District. "Before, people didn't really care about the traffic speed. Now, because they see us there, they are aware that they must follow the traffic speeds."

It was a success that wasn't achieved without challenges for both police forces.

"At first it was very difficult for us to

understand each other," Romonsky said, referring to the language barriers they faced. "But I've learned that pretty much any obstacle can be overcome."

Police of KMOI and Jahra District from Kuwait along with the MPs of ASG-KU and the 79th MP Company were able to make Operation Roadrunner more successful by picking up a mix of English and Arabic.



Capt. Samuel A. Arnett, provost marshal, Army Support Group-Kuwait, embraces Capt. Al Mutiny Mutlaq, shift officer with the traffic department of Jahra District police during one of many visits to the department.

“The more we can communicate with our partners the stronger and better our relationship will be.”

~ Arnett

“It’s a part of that partnership,” said Capt. Samuel A. Arnett, provost marshal, ASG-KU, who made it a point to learn as much Arabic as possible for the operation.

It’s not just business for the team, whose members often come together socially to reinforce their union.

“A lot of times you see uniforms but you don’t see people,” said Brandenburg, who enjoyed several cookouts and events with Kuwaiti partners where they’ve traded food, games and traditions. “This really improves that relationship because it puts names to faces for both us and the Kuwaitis.”

During a visit that the MPs took to the Jahra District police department, Al-Rashidi proudly held a photo of the Operation Roadrunner team given to him by Arnett.

“We want you to feel like this is your ‘home away from home,’” he said to the MPs, adding that he looked forward to more visits with them.

Because of their bond, the team is not distinguished by their differences in backgrounds, languages or uniforms. Instead, they are unified by friendship and a common goal of making Kuwait a safer place to travel. **A**

The price of speeding in Kuwait

NAME (Last - First - Middle Initial)

ON POST

Traveling 1-35 kph over speed limit = 3-5 points

Over 35 kph = 6 points



40 kph » Maximum speed limit

OFF POST

Traveling 1-40 kph over speed limit = 2-4 points

Over 41 kph = 7 points



120 kph » Maximum speed limit



6 driving points in a year could result in loss of driving privileges.

TICKET NUMBER

H 20501

Information from Command Policy Memorandum #15 Traffic Control Plan for Army Support Group-Kuwait Installations. For details call the Provost Marshal Office at (318) 430-1508.

DD FORM 1300, 1 DEC 62. REPLACES DA FORM 10, 1 NOV 54, AND AF FORM 101, WHICH ARE OBSOLETE.

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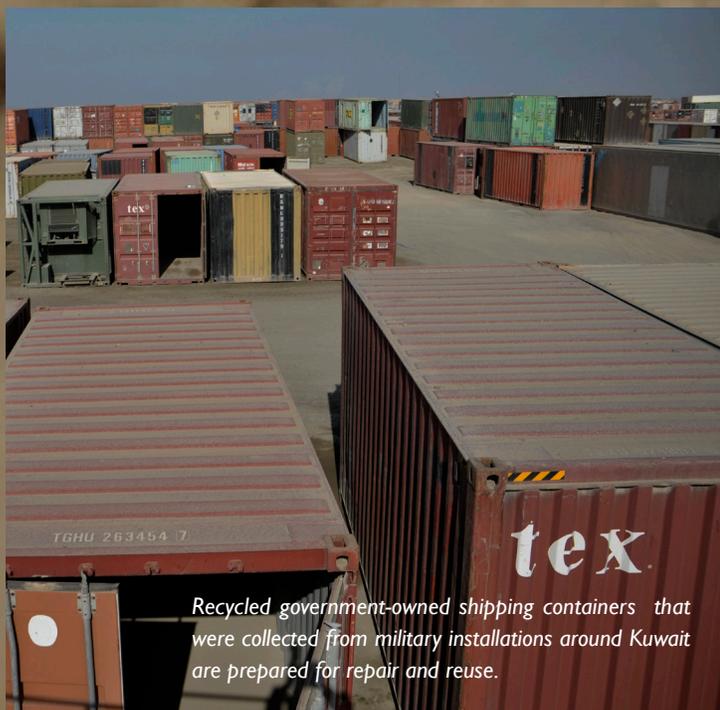
Container retrograde saves US millions

By Sgt. Ashley M. Outler

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — In the surge of modern war, success is not often reached by a force of warfighters alone, it is also dependent upon items concealed in the legions of shipping containers that reinforce the fight.

As the war in Iraq came to an end and troops returned home, many of the containers filled with equipment once used to sustain troops at war are now mountains of war relics shadowing several U.S. military bases in Kuwait.

To ensure the containers and their contents didn't waste away in the desert, Operation Steel Purge sought to give them a new mission — saving money.



Recycled government-owned shipping containers that were collected from military installations around Kuwait are prepared for repair and reuse.



Staff Sgt. Larry K. Davis III, retrograde noncommissioned officer with the 1109th Aviation Sustainment Maintenance Group, lowers a shipping container to be released to Operation Steel Purge.

“Operation Steel Purge is an effort to reclaim shipping containers being used as long-term storage,” said Maj. John T. Bowman, country container authority for Kuwait, 316th Expeditionary Sustainment Command. “As we face these budgetary restraints, this is one way we can get the cost of logistics in-hand.”

Recycling the government-owned shipping containers saves the U.S. government millions of dollars that would be used to buy or rent new ones, which can cost up to \$6,000 apiece, added Bowman.

“When we utilize a commercial carrier for shipping it creates excessive expense to the Department of Defense,” said Bowman.

Nearly all of the 25,000 shipping containers in Kuwait were purchased to support the war in Iraq because costs associated with renting the steel boxes were going to outweigh the value of the container.

As the containers arrived in Kuwait, they assumed a storage role until a cost-efficient plan was put into place to consolidate, repair and return them to duty to be used as shipping containers; the job they were intended for.

“Since we own these containers in Kuwait, we can reclaim them, reintroduce them into the distribution network and decrease the amount of money that we pay to commercial companies to move our equipment,” said Bowman.

Military units now responsible for any of the shipping containers in Kuwait assist the Operation Steel Purge team to identify and move available containers to Camp Arifjan, Kuwait where they are consolidated and prepared for reuse.

“We’ve been steel purging since we got here in August 2012. We started with 181 containers. Throughout the last eight months we have turned in 114 containers and currently we have 67 remaining,” said Capt. David J. Flounders, Sr., retrograde officer-in-charge, with the 1109th Aviation Sustainment Maintenance Group, a National Guard unit from Groton, Conn.

Once reintroduced to the distribution network, many of the containers can be used to support further drawdown operations. The goal was to recover about 40 percent of containers in Kuwait by April.

“Even though we have a deadline, the reduction of containers will stretch beyond the conclusion of Steel Purge,” said Bowman. “What we are trying to do is purge as many shipping containers as we can without creating a disruption.”

Once a container is released, it is delivered to the retrograde



A contractor clears out equipment from inside a shipping container to be processed for redistribution, at the retrograde yard of the General Dynamics Information Technology Center.

yard at the General Dynamics Information Technology Center, where its contents find a new purpose as well.

“What we need to be doing all the time is saving money, so we can prosper as a country and keep our national security and defenses up,” said Michael Hamilton, retrograde manager at the GDIT retrograde yard. “If you are able to take these items and repair and recycle them then we are saving money.”

Many of the containers that Operation Steel Purge claims have been abandoned and are turned in are filled with an array of unidentified equipment. Once a container has been delivered to the retrograde yard and is unsealed, the team enters the unknown to awaken whatever treasures lie within.

“Anything is possible when you open the container door. It could be anything; from animals, to equipment, to money, you name it,” said Grayland M. Price, the lead tech inspector at the GDIT retrograde yard, who is typically the first person to enter a container and was once surprised to find a stray cat that had wandered into one.

The team of contracted civilians, which includes several veterans, works diligently to clear out, organize and process about \$50 million worth of salvaged supplies every month. This saves the Department of Defense \$50 million in supplies it would otherwise have to purchase new.

“I understand the importance of having supplies right there, that I can reach out and touch and work with,” said Hamilton, who is himself an Army veteran. “To me, this is about helping those service members who are putting their life on the line. I’m doing my part to support them because I know they are supporting me.”

Each hand involved in the process to reuse shipping containers and their contents has found a way to put money back in America’s pocket and reinforcements into the fight. **A**

Features



ABOVE: What remained of the vehicle Staff Sgt. Michael A. Stagg pulled retired Sgt. Brian C. Fleming from after they were attacked by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan, July 2006. (Courtesy photo)

LEFT: During their reunion, retired Sgt. Brian C. Fleming and Staff Sgt. Michael A. Stagg pose with “Nuts”, a beanie baby that was on their dashboard when they were attacked by a suicide bomber.

Wounded warrior & hero unexpectedly reunite

By Sgt. Ashley M. Outler

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — Nearly six years after being pulled from the wreckage of an explosion in Afghanistan, a survivor was unexpectedly reunited with his rescuer here, March 4.

When Staff Sgt. Michael A. Stagg last saw retired Army Sgt. Brian C. Fleming, dazed and burnt lying in a hospital bed, he couldn't imagine ever seeing him again.

It was either fate or coincidence that they happened to recognize each other in passing on Fleming's stop in Kuwait from Afghanistan while he was on Operation Proper Exit.

“Operation Proper Exit is about bringing wounded warriors back into the war zone and leaving on our own terms,” said Fleming. “I didn't have any one reason to go on the trip because I never felt I really had any issues with closure. I never felt like I left anything there. Now, I really believe, the whole reason I came was to walk past my friend on the way back.”

Fleming and Stagg were able to confront some of their demons by sharing terrifying memories of the experience that brought them together that day in July 2006.

They had deployed with 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division (LI), and were traveling with two others down Highway 1, near Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, when a white minivan they were passing exploded, shooting shards of shrapnel through their humvee and showering it in white phosphorus.

“I was in the passenger seat and the (vehicle borne improvised explosive device) detonated about three feet from me,” said Fleming, who was an infantryman at the time. “The blast completely destroyed the vehicle and put about a two-foot crater in the highway.”

Stagg, who was the only medic in the vehicle, recalls being the

only person coherent enough to respond.

“My instincts just set in,” said Stagg about his reaction after the explosion. “I knew it was time to do my job.”

Stagg carefully maneuvered around the phosphorus to pull Fleming and the other two passengers from the vehicle before the fire progressed.

“I don't really remember anything until the point when I was laying down in the dirt, after Stagg had gotten me out,” said Fleming, who was treated for second-degree burns on his neck and face and third-degree burns on his hands. “It really hurt. They told me to calm down, but I was in pain and I was angry.”

Fleming had taken the brunt of the white phosphorus, a substance capable of burning through bone, insoluble to water and fueled by air. There was not much Stagg could offer him for treatment.

“I was like, ‘keep yelling man,’ because that's how I knew his airway was fine,” said Stagg, who could only ease Fleming's pain by shielding him from the grueling desert sun.

Exhausted, Stagg breathed a sigh of relief when an Apache helicopter flew over the horizon because in that moment he knew they would be OK.

“This guy is a bona fide hero,” said Fleming, who was glad to have the chance to show Stagg his gratitude in person. “I don't know where I would be if he didn't pull me from that vehicle. He absolutely saved my life.”

Through their reunion, both Stagg and Fleming discovered that sharing their experiences and feelings in the aftermath of the attack would help to heal internal wounds.

“Nothing in my Army career would’ve prepared me for that. And to be the only medic, had I froze, all four of us could’ve been killed,” said Stagg, a native of Harrington, Del. “I was lucky enough to walk away with just a little bruise and some nightmares. My bell was rung, I’ll tell you that much.”

Talking with Fleming also allowed Stagg a chance to settle a painful guilt that has plagued him.

“That morning I was supposed to be on the gun, but being that I knew the way to Kandahar and was the only medic, we decided that I would drive and I put that private on the gun. It’s heavy when you’re in a leadership position and you make a decision and people end up hurt because of it,” said Stagg, holding back tears. “But to hear Fleming say, ‘you did the right thing, it wasn’t your fault,’ really means so much.”

In spite of their wounds, both survivors have refused to let that experience define them.

**“A LOT OF GUYS THINK THAT
THEY STRUGGLE ALONE, BUT
WE AREN'T ALONE — WE HAVE
EACH OTHER.”**

~ Fleming

“My entire perspective since being home from Afghanistan has been; alright I got hurt, but I’m alive and I’m going to heal,” said Fleming. “For me it’s like, ‘OK you can blow me up if you want, but you didn’t take me out of the fight. I’m not scared.’”

Fleming now lives in Celina, Texas, and is an author and motivational speaker, while Stagg works here as the clinic operations noncommissioned officer in charge of the Troop Medical Clinic. They agreed that no matter how far apart they are, they would always be linked by that traumatic experience.

“Once something like that happens, you get rocketed, mortared, or hit with a VBIED or anything like that and survive, you instantly have a bond that no one can break,” said Stagg. “It’s just a horrible time that you share, you can relate to each other and feel open. I can tell him everything hands down and I know that he won’t pass judgment on me because he knows — he’s been there.”

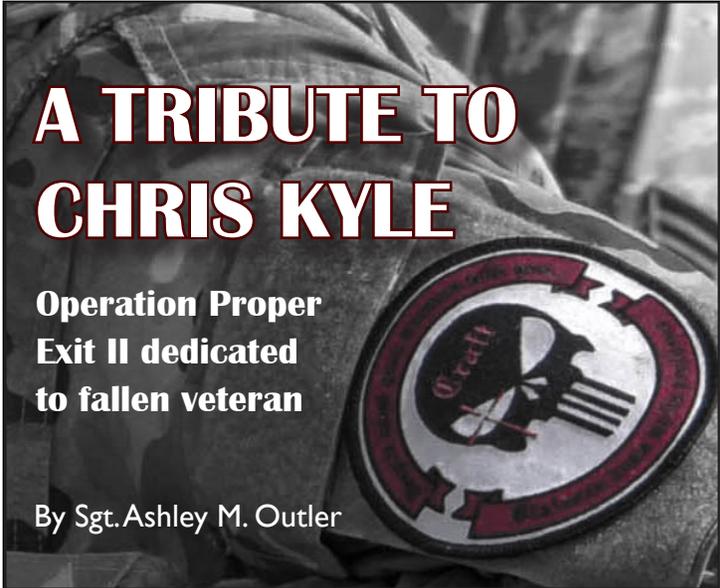
They used the few hours Fleming had at Camp Arifjan on his trip with Operation Proper Exit II to make up for lost time.

“Through talking to each other we’ve realized that we’ve gone through a lot of the same stuff in the aftermath. I told him that these are things that I’ve also dealt with and still do at times. A lot of guys think that they struggle alone, but we aren’t alone, we have each other,” said Fleming, who described their meeting as the ‘cherry on top’ of his trip with Operation Proper Exit.

It’s not often that medics have a chance to see patients after a situation like theirs, so it meant a lot for Stagg to have the chance to see Fleming in much better condition, knowing that he had contributed to it.

“Not many people drive through a VBIED that blows up so close and walk away from it. It can cause a lot of compound stress but it helps a lot to see Fleming, I wish I had seen him sooner,” said Stagg. “Just to be able to have someone to say, ‘hey man I’m having a rough time,’ and know that they understand is wonderful.”

Their reunion offered both Stagg and Fleming a chance to close the door on the memories of their last encounter with a proper exit and open a door for new and better ones. **A**



A TRIBUTE TO CHRIS KYLE

**Operation Proper
Exit II dedicated
to fallen veteran**

By Sgt. Ashley M. Outler

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait—Retired Chief Petty Officer Chris Kyle, famed Navy SEAL sniper who lost his life in service to veterans, was paid homage during Operation Proper Exit II, when Third Army/U.S. Army Central hosted the group of wounded warriors as they traveled through Kuwait on their trip to Afghanistan, Feb. 26- March 4, where they intended to find closure.

“We dedicated this trip to Chris. He gave a lot to wounded warriors, and his wife continues to support the community. The Kyles are examples of what we need all Americans to be,” said Rick Kell, co-founder of Troops First Foundation the organization that sponsored the event, and a close friend of the Kyles.

The service members and civilians who made up OPE II, showed their tribute to Kyle by wearing a patch that represents Craft International, the Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business founded by Kyle, which serves as a Tactical Training Provider for military and law enforcement personnel.

“He personally gave me the patch that I’m carrying. I think of it as a piece of him that I’m carrying with me at all times. It’s like having him next to me,” said retired Army Sgt. Omar A. Avila.

The civilian representatives of Troops First Foundation were issued military uniforms for the trip, which they used to showcase their patches while the wounded warriors attached it to their bags.

“Being back and seeing everything that has been done and how it has improved is a great thing. It really helps provide that closure that you might not find back at home,” said Avila. “This is something (Kyle) would really like to see. I think he’s looking down on us right now with pride.” **A**

A full-page photograph of a diver in a black wetsuit and mask, holding a black bag with "THE STEEL" written on it. The diver is positioned centrally, looking towards the camera. The background is a deep blue, suggesting an underwater environment. The diver's gear, including a regulator and a tank, is visible. The bag is held in the diver's right hand, and the text "THE STEEL" is written in white on the front of the bag.

When 1st Lt. Christie Plackis first heard about dive school, she knew it was her calling and would stop at nothing to become a part of the male-dominated career field.

Diver makes waves in Army history

By Sgt. Micah J. VanDyke

SHUAIBA PORT, Kuwait — She walked into tryouts and quite simply stood out; she was the only female competitor. The male Soldiers sized each other up wondering who would survive. They assumed she didn't stand a chance at swimming 20 laps, 500 meters, in under the required 14 minutes, let alone finishing in roughly nine. She blew them away by continuing the competition and dominating the other four events as she swam lap for lap against the men.

"They were making comments, some looked terrified," she said. "After I beat one guy during the swim, he turned to me and said, 'I didn't expect you to be so fast since you're a woman.' I just knew he was implying 'it was nice of you to show up but I know you're not going to make it.'"

Because she survived the swim portion of the Diver Physical Fitness Test, 1st Lt. Christie Plackis, the executive officer assigned to the 74th Engineer Dive Detachment and deployed from Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., is no longer just fan of the dive field; she's the only female diver in the Army today.

She combined her love of water and need for a challenge to become the fourth female since 1982 to break into the male-dominated career field of Army diving.

This athletic young woman relentlessly pursued her dream of diving while displaying the same 'grit and grind' characteristics shown by Demi Moore on the big screen.

"I thought it was going to be like the movie 'G.I. Jane' — that was going to be me," said Plackis.

At eight-years-old she swam competitively, not knowing that this would prepare her for her true destiny of being an Army diver. Her competitive nature persisted throughout her high school years while she savored her time on the swim team.

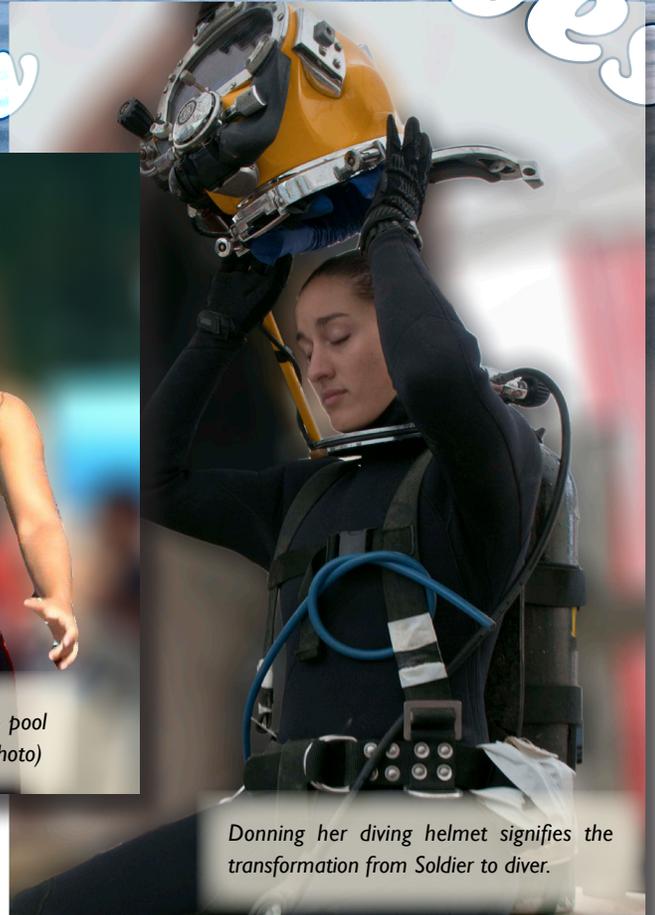
"After a hard day at school, swimming was my release and the atmosphere fueled my motivation," she said.

This connection with water remained constant during her college years while she coached and worked as a lifeguard. This kept her in peak physical shape for the challenges to come.

In 2007, as a cadet in Army ROTC at San Diego State University, she learned from a fellow alumnus, who also became a dive officer, about how to become a diver and that it was open to females. At the time, many in the dive field felt that females didn't belong.



Growing up, Plackis lived at the pool during the summer. (Courtesy photo)



Donning her diving helmet signifies the transformation from Soldier to diver.

"This is what I'm going to do," stated Plackis with confidence. "I don't care that the numbers are against me or that I'm the only female."

During her officer training she would ask anyone who mentioned diving to talk about it. More often than not, the responses weren't pleasant.

"I was so excited to be a diver that I asked an instructor questions about the dive field," said Plackis. "When I told him I wanted to become a diver, he responded by saying, 'nope, you're too small and weak.'"

This sort of response was all too familiar to the resilient young woman. She let it roll off, like water off a duck's back.

"There were a lot of haters, I had to step back and remind myself that they don't even know me," she said. "It just fueled the fire to train harder. It made me angry but determined. It motivated me."

Every evening, after long grueling days spent becoming an engineer officer, she continued swimming until the day of tryouts. In diving, being prepared mentally and physically is the only way to have a fighting chance of making the cut.

The Dive Officer Selection Board, consisting of leadership from the Army engineer dive field, interviewed Plackis after she completed her fitness test. They had the final say on whether she continued her training.

"It's pretty cool, she was gung-ho, ready to duke it out with the guys straight off the bat," said Spc. Dagan Indeck, a second-class diver who trained with her and now serves beside her in the 74th

Features

In 2009, Plackis runs on Mission Beach, San Diego with fellow cadets during Army ROTC. (Courtesy photo)



"There were a lot of haters, it fueled the fire to train harder. It made me angry but determined, it motivated me."

~Plackis

EDD. "She's not held to a different standard, she passed the same physical fitness test for divers, male or female."

After surviving three physically intense weeks of training during phase-one dive school at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., she spent six months devouring each and every aspect of Army diving during phase two at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center, Panama City, Fla.

Many females find pull-ups extremely challenging due to the upper body strength required for this exercise.

"I liked PT, but it was always one of those morale killers for me, everyone else always finished before me," said Plackis, who recalled those strenuous physical fitness routines consisting of 100 pull-ups, 500 push-ups and other extreme exercises.

Army and Navy divers train together during dive school. One of her classmates, a Navy diver, who had traditional views regarding who should be there, pulled her aside before he graduated and said something unexpected.

"I don't know how to tell you, I have a lot of respect for you," said this diver, who in her opinion was always her biggest critic. "You worked so hard on your push-ups and pull-ups after duty hours. During the toughest times, watching you made us say, 'How can we quit? If she can do it, we can too.'"

"I was so encouraged. I realized in dive school that my presence, my existence, makes people better," said Plackis. "Just the fact that I am there and not quitting, meant they weren't going to quit."

"I went there to meet the standard, I didn't go there to do less," she added.

This can-do, exceptional attitude earned her the respect of not only the dive instructors, but one in particular who currently serves as the master diver in her unit.

"In the past, women weren't typically allowed or didn't make it through dive school, most failed the pull-ups," said Master Diver Sgt. 1st Class Michael Randall. "Not with her, I was there when she first started and throughout her training there was no question that she would finish — she definitely wasn't pushed through."

She not only proved herself to the male divers, she brought a spiritual connection that burned like the sun.

"I gave it 110 percent, but something could've gone wrong



Plackis climbs out of a hole in Vortex Springs during dive school. (Courtesy Photo)

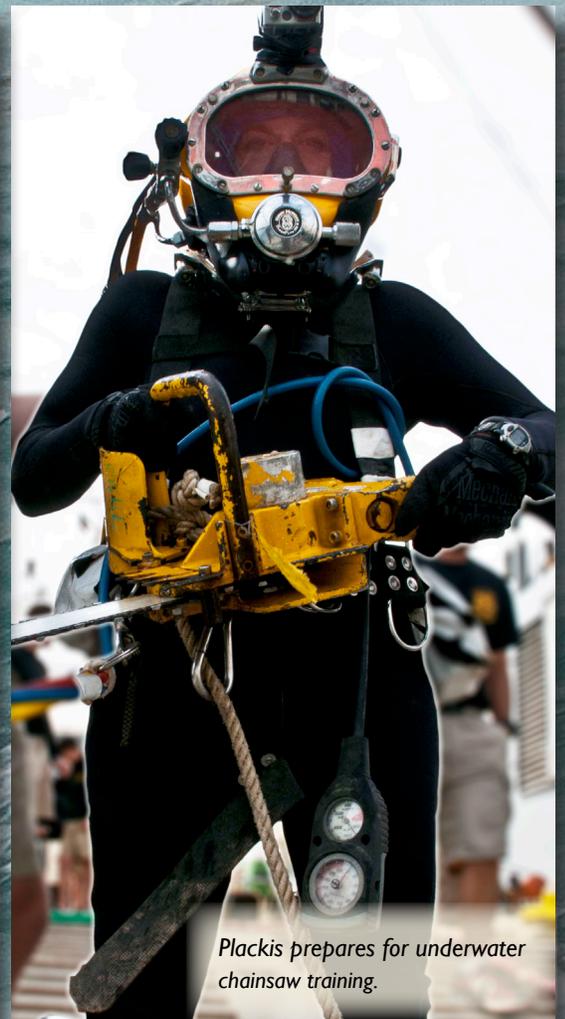
and I could've not been picked," said Plackis who used her faith to pick herself up in those times filled with doubt. "The biggest thing is how much a role God played in my life by giving me the motivation to train up as hard as I did; He got me through every step of the way."

By channeling her love of swimming, personal courage and spiritual beliefs, she's succeeded where others have failed and solidified her place in woman's history. Being the fourth woman to carry the torch, she has overcome many physical and mental challenges, even when some questioned her place in the diving world.

"It was all worth it, the uncertainties; the hard work," she concluded. "I learned the true meaning of the saying, 'when you set your mind to something, anything is possible.'" ^A



Plackis attends a dive brief before underwater hydraulic tool training.



Plackis prepares for underwater chainsaw training.



Plackis 'splashes' into the water during training.



In the zone

SHOOTING HOOPS WITH NICK CANNON



"With all the stress and the seriousness of just being a Soldier, I am glad they got the opportunity to let their hair down and have a good time. We came here to bring them that good time."

~Cannon

By Sgt. Micah J. VanDyke

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — Over the years, basketball has been a source of stress release for many troops during deployment. It can be a fun way to get an extensive cardio workout for even the fittest service member. To have this sport become an opportunity to play against celebrities makes it that much sweeter.

This is the reality for the winning team of the March Madness All-Star basketball tournament, April 3-5. They showed their skills and dominated the competition, sweeping them 3-0 in a best-of-five game series. This gave them a chance to play against Nick Cannon, Big Boy, Baby Bash and others from the Power 106 N'Credible USO/Armed Forces Entertainment tour on their favorite hardwood floor at the Zone 1

gym.

These aren't ordinary players, as they jokingly speak of themselves as superheroes. After contemplating ideas, they decided on the perfect name for their team.

"One day we were at practice trying to figure out what we should call ourselves and we came up with thousands of names," said Lashaundra "The Rejector" Shaw, noncommissioned officer in charge of the 28th Public Affairs Detachment and deployed from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. "While kidding around about having superhero names, we decided to be the 'Avengers.'"

"We even came up with our own names like the 'Fast-Breaker' or 'Dunk Master' and some famous names like 'Iron Man' or



Nick Cannon motivates the crowd during halftime.

'Storm,' said Shaw. "It just kind of worked out and we had fun picking our names."

These superheroes of Arifjan's hardwood got their chance at stardom April 18 when they squared off against Cannon and Big Boy.

"(Cannon) is pretty funny. He added a little laughter to the game," said Pfc. Ashley "Swisher" Johnson, casualty operations, 22nd Human Resource Command, 1st Theater Support Command, deployed from JBLM.

Beyond the excitement from going head-to-head with Cannon, more than a few players became sentimental from the novelty of meeting him.

"I can tell the Soldiers who replace us here that we did this and maybe they can have the opportunity to do it as well. Playing a celebrity game was a blast," said Spc. James "Hawkeye" Bridges, a battle NCO for 595th Transportation Brigade. "This is something I can tell my kids about generation after generation."

Just as the Soldiers were humbled by the



Nick Cannon shoots over members of the Avengers during the April 18 All-Star Basketball game.

"This is something I can tell my kids about generation after generation."

~Hawkeye

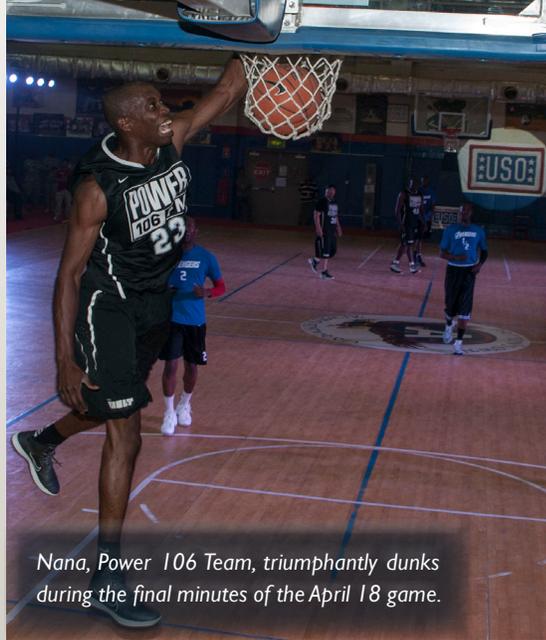
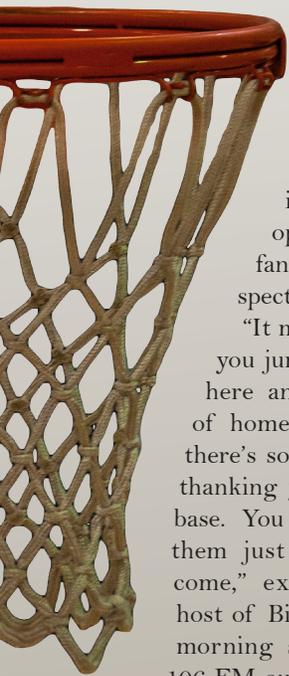
experience, so was Kurt "Big Boy" Alexander. His animated presence and humorous interactions with the opposing team and the fans made for a hilarious spectacle.

"It makes you feel amazing, you jump on a plane, you get here and leave the comforts of home, but when you arrive there's so much love and people thanking you for coming to the base. You really end up thanking them just for allowing you to come," explained Big Boy, the host of Big Boy's Neighborhood morning show aired on Power 106 FM out of Los Angeles. "We show up and hang out for a week — that's absolutely nothing compared to the sacrifices that you guys make."

Members of the Power 106 tour, Baby Bash, Kristinia DeBarge, 4 Count and PWD, performed during halftime, giving service members a nice break from the heated battle on the court.

Unfortunately, the combined super powers of the Avengers basketball team couldn't stop visiting Power 106 Team from taking the game. They came within three points during the final minutes of the game, but couldn't overcome the teamwork of the visitors. In the final seconds of the game, during a last ditch-effort to close the gap, the buzzer sounded with the final score: Power 106 Team 92, Avengers 83.

"It's more than about who wins the game, it's the camaraderie and ability to experience the love and teamwork here. It's been a great time with new fellowships formed," said Cannon. "It's an honor to play with the troops tonight. With all the stress and the seriousness of just being a Soldier, I am glad they got the opportunity to let their hair down and have a good time. We came here to bring them that good time." **A**



Nana, Power 106 Team, triumphantly dunks during the final minutes of the April 18 game.



Team Avengers player, 1/2, battles April 5 for a chance to play Nick Cannon.



The Avengers celebrate a series sweep April 5 in preparation to play Nick Cannon.



Baby Bash performs during halftime while Avenger player, the Hulk, dances along.



Arlen Escarpeta tries to block Avenger player, Venom as he shoots.

WOOD SHOP

A FUN, CREATIVE WAY TO PASS SOME TIME

By Sgt. James Hale

CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait

— There are many building materials being used in products that we buy every day, from the plastic in our water bottles to the metal in electronics and jewelry. Yet one building material is fun to work with and has stood the test of time — wood.

At the Camp Arifjan wood shop experienced wood workers from all over the world teach service members to use the various wood-working tools in the shop and help them to create projects. These projects range from cutting boards to intricately detailed jewelry boxes, all using recycled wood left over from other Army projects on the camp.

Nikhil Plavida Ravi, a carpenter from India, says he loves teaching the Soldiers his craft and that he is amazed at how fast some of them pick up on the techniques.

Soldiers are required to attend a safety class at the wood shop before being set loose on the various machines and tools to create whatever

they can imagine.

"I heard about the wood shop from some of the guys I work with," said Sgt.

Maj. Gilbert Hurte, the chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive (CBRNE) sergeant major for Third Army/U.S. Army Central G-36. "It's great. Once I made my first project I was addicted."

Some Soldiers build their projects to send home as gifts. Others just need a nightstand for their room. But, all the Soldiers in the shop had smiles on their faces while working on them.

"I have a lot of fun while I'm here in the shop," said Capt. Jason Hempstead, the budget officer for the 316th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary). "The wood shop is not only a great place to pass the time, but you get a sense of accomplishment every time you complete a project." ^A



Sgt. Maj. Gilbert Hurte smooths the edges on his cutting board by sanding them down with a power sander.



Sgt. Maj. Gilbert Hurte adds the finishing touch to his cutting board the old fashioned way by sanding the smaller edges by hand.



Capt. Jason Hempstead uses a wood burning tool to darken the engraving on his project.



A close up view of Capt. Jason Hempstead using a wood burning tool to darken the engraving on his project.

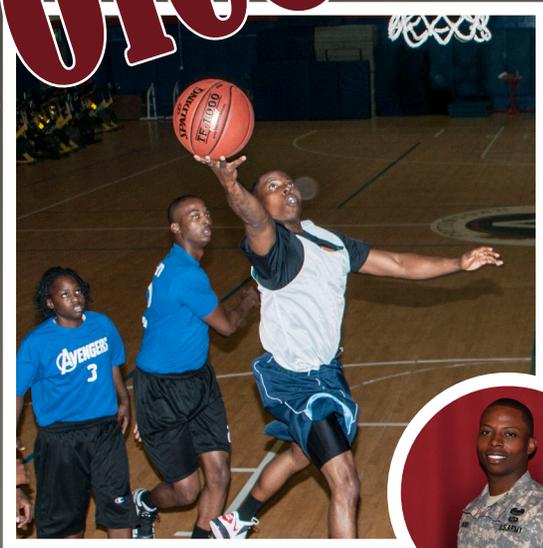


"It's great. Once I made my first project I was addicted."

~Hurte

Voices

WHAT HELPS YOU UNWIND?



"Shooting hoops allows me to leave work at work. It's a great way to relieve the tensions of the day."

~Walker

*Capt. Courtney Walker
Training Officer
Third Army/U.S. Army Central*

"In Louisiana, music is used as a relief of stress, a reminder that everything is going to be ok. Even though you're away from family and friends, the music takes you back."

~King



*Cpl. Alonzo D. King
Administrative Clerk
Marine Corps Forces Central Command*



"Softball has always been a constant in my life. Having the chance to play while deployed is like having a little piece of home."

~Taylor

*Staff Sgt. Brittney M. Taylor
Satellite Technician Analyst
18th Intelligence Squadron, U.S. Air Force*

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