

# SEABEE COURIER

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**QUICK EDITION**

Vol. 2 No. 4

Naval Construction Battalion Center, Gulfport, Mississippi

March 15, 2019

## NCBC Gulfport hosts ambassadors for 24th Experience America tour

**By Ryan Labadens**

NCBC Gulfport Public Affairs

Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, Miss., hosted 34 foreign ambassadors from four different continents Feb. 26, 2019, as part of the U.S. Department of State and the Office of the Chief of Protocol's 24th Experience America tour.

According to a press release distributed by Ambassador Sean P. Lawler, Chief of Protocol of the United States, the Experience America tour is a State Department program designed to connect foreign ambassadors with academic, business, community and cultural leaders with the goal of building relationships to promote economic investment, commerce and dialogue, while giving these ambassadors stationed in Washington, D.C. the opportunity to learn firsthand about American culture, history and industry.

NCBC Gulfport, which is home of the Atlantic Fleet Seabees, was the first stop on the final leg of this three-day tour that lasted from Feb. 24-26. During their trip, the ambassadors met with members of the Gulf Coast Business Council, which facilitates cooperation between private and public sector entities and promotes initiatives to attract new opportunities and industries to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. They also toured the Port of Gulfport, a deep-water international seaport and hub of maritime commerce, as well as the University of Southern Mississippi to learn more about the ocean engineering demands throughout the state



**Cmdr. Russel Bates, Naval Construction Training Center (NCTC) commanding officer, speaks with a group of foreign ambassadors before their tour of the training center onboard Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, Miss., Feb. 26, 2019.**  
(U.S. Navy photo by Ryan Labadens/released)

and new ocean technology being developed and currently in use.

This trip to the Mississippi Gulf Coast also allowed the ambassadors to learn more about the state of Mississippi's geography and waterways and its ties to the world's maritime econ-

omy, as well as the scientific, technical and military research and engineering facilities hosted in Mississippi, all of which play important roles in the state's economy.

The tour of NCBC Gulfport itself allowed them to get a better understanding of how the base supports the Seabees, which provide task-tailored, adaptable and combat effective engineering and construction forces that deploy to support U.S. Navy objectives around the world.

During their tour, the ambassadors first visited the Colmer Dining Facility, where they dined on Navy cuisine while Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, Capt. William Whitmire, NCBC Gulfport commanding officer, and other NCBC Gulfport commanders and officials welcomed them to Mississippi and to the installation. Whitmire then gave the ambassadors a brief history of



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# Navy program assists Gold Star Survivors

By Brian Lamar  
NCBC Public Affairs

The U.S. Navy is a dangerous and stressful job. When a member of the Navy dies, family members often need long-term help.

That's where the Gold Star program comes in.

Emily Kolenda, Navy Gold Star Coordinator, said the program works with parents, siblings, spouses, and children of the fallen to provide long-term support and resources. That includes counseling, financial education, education benefits, maintaining community camaraderie, and dealing with military paperwork. Kolenda works with about 1,150 families, 200 of those being in Mississippi. She serves others states, including Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina.

"My job is to provide awareness to the community, and also for different events that may be happening," Kolenda said. "Unfortunately, we don't have

access to every single survivor, so by providing that education and awareness component, we may be able to assist more people that we haven't been able to identify."

Family members aren't always aware of the Gold Star program – unless something happens to their loved one, Kolenda said.

When a service member dies, a Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO) is available to provide information, resources, and assistance. After the CACO has completed their work, Kolenda steps in to introduce the program that offers that long-term component. "We will provide that support as long as they reside in the state or in the area," Kolenda said. "If they relocate, we will connect them with a coordinator that covers that area."

One of the most popular benefits is education. "Education benefits are huge because a lot of spouses and children would like to go to college, or back to

college," she said. "Most benefits are provided through the Veterans Affairs Department, however, there are great organizations that are also supporting Gold Star kids who provide additional funding to be able to offset some additional costs – so they reconnect to be able to get that information." She said one of the most underutilized benefits is counseling.

"It's not the most utilized, but it's the most needed," Kolenda said. "I provide the information regarding the counseling - there is no monetary benefit I can give out. If someone lives near an installation like Meridian or Gulfport, we may be able to connect them with the Fleet and Family Support Center who offers a counseling service."

"If someone is in a remote area, it is my role to find a resource near them that would be able to have limited or no cost to them so that they can receive the benefit."

Kolenda said although Gold Star is Navy specific, other branches

are not excluded. The Navy recognizes any cause of death, whether it is combat-related, illness, suicide, homicide, or accident. Support is provided, no matter the cause.

"If they call us, we will provide those same resources, and will include them in events and activities so they can still have that camaraderie," Kolenda said. "Gold Star families that I have met just want to meet other Gold Star families, because they feel they are relatable. Anytime we can get groups together, no matter the branch, I think they are just appreciative of that opportunity."

To find out more about the Gold Star program, visit [www.goldstar.com](http://www.goldstar.com) or [www.facebook.com/navy-goldstar](http://www.facebook.com/navy-goldstar) or call 1-888-509-8759, the Navy Gold Star Hotline.

Families of the fallen can contact the Fleet and Family Support Center, 5301 Snead Street, Gulfport, MS 39501-5001 or call (228) 871-4569 or 1-800-342-3525 or email: [emily.kolenda@navy.mil](mailto:emily.kolenda@navy.mil)

## Kolenda named 2018 Navy Gold Star Coordinator of the Year

By Ryan Labadens  
NCBC Gulfport Public Affairs

Service to one's country is one thing our nation's military members are known for. Giving back to the families of those who died in service of their country is what the Navy Gold Star Program does, and it is what one of Gulfport's own Fleet and Family Service Center (FFSC) members was recently recognized for.

Emily Kolenda, the Navy Gold Star coordinator for Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, Miss., was named the Navy Gold Star Coordinator of the Year for 2018. Rear Adm. Bette Bolivar, Commander, Navy Region Southeast, presented the award to Kolenda during a Southeast Region Navy Gold Star Conference at Naval Air Station (NAS) Jacksonville Feb. 12, 2019.

**"We are so fortunate to have Emily as she provides exceptional 'Can Do' services to Navy Gold Star families. "**

- Barbara Jones  
NCBC FFSC Director

The Navy Gold Star Program is the U.S. Navy's official organization designed to provide long-term support to surviving families of Sailors who pass away while serving in the military.

Kolenda has worked with various military-affiliated organizations since 2001. She met her husband, a U.S. Navy Seabee who was deployed to Chinhae, South Korea, while she was working there as an intern for Moral, Welfare and Recreation (MWR). The two of them moved around over the years whenever her husband was



Rear Adm. Bette Bolivar, Commander, Navy Region Southeast, presents an award to Emily Kolenda, Navy Gold Star Program coordinator for Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, during a Southeast Region Navy Gold Star Conference at Naval Air Station (NAS) Jacksonville Feb. 12, 2019. Kolenda was named Navy Gold Star Coordinator of the Year for 2018. (U.S. Navy courtesy photo/Released)

stationed at different locations, and she wound up working for FFSC while they were at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2013. She entered the newly-created position of Navy Gold Star coordinator at Gulfport when her family moved here in 2017.

"The Gold Star program created a new coordinator position here in Gulfport because of the need and how many survivors there were... and I was the lucky selectee to be able to take on this role," said Kolenda. "Since it was a chance

for me to stay with Fleet and Family and to learn about a program that was new and growing, this was really enticing to me."

According to the Navy Gold Star website (<https://www.navygoldstar.com/>), the Navy Gold Star program was established on Oct. 1, 2014, to help provide continuing support for surviving family members of fallen service members. The

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the Seabees and a description of what they do.

"I think it's a great opportunity to showcase not only our Department of Defense but the capabilities of the Naval construction force, particularly for these countries," said Whitmire. "Many of the countries that are represented here today have had Seabees in them doing humanitarian civic action work and theater security cooperation, and so it gives them a little bit of context as to where the Seabees come from and helps them to better understand what the United States is doing to increase partnerships around the world."

The ambassadors then visited the Naval Construction Training Center (NCTC), which instructs U.S. Navy Sailors, U.S. Army Soldiers and U.S. Air Force Airmen in various construction trades in a joint-training environment.

Ambassador Gerald M. Zacklos, Ambassador of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, noted how much he enjoyed getting to visit NCBC Gulfport to learn more about the Seabees, and how much he appreciated whenever they visited his country to work on various construction and humanitarian relief projects.

"I enjoyed very much having visited the base and seeing all the training, and being able to relate to the final outcome of that training whenever the Seabees come to help our people," said Zacklos. "It's a good feeling to see the Seabees providing such tremendous assistance around the world."

## NCBC assists Boys and Girls Club

By Lt. Sarah Powell

NCBC Assistant Chaplain

On Saturday March 9th, 2019, twenty-one students from the Naval Construction Training Center, along with several Seabees from the Naval Construction Battalion Center of Gulfport, Mississippi responded to the call to serve the Gulf Coast community through creating a garden and several rain barrels for a local Boys and Girls Club.

"It was exciting to see this many come together to support this project and to work together as a unified team. They worked hard and got a multi-faceted, complex job done in only two and half hours. To think that they sacrificed their personal time to come out and serve is a real tribute to the US Navy," said Chaplain Sarah Powell.

Ms. Racquel Casey of the Steps Coalition said, "We couldn't have done this without the Seabees. They are very smart, handy, and helpful." Casey shared about her organization and about the grant they applied for and received saying, "We, the Steps Coalition are a non-for-profit organization that works around five pillars, namely, human rights, the preservation of historical communities, environmental justice, affordable housing, and economic justice. The Environmental Protective Agency gave us a grant to use in any way we saw fit and so we decided to use the allotted monies for children. The Boys and Girls Club's

need for assistance for a rain bar-rel and garden project aligned with our five pillars. Together we're impacting over two hundred children."

Mr. James Franklin, a market farmer in the community, commented about his contribution to the project saying, "I am affiliated with Steps Coalition and am able to join with them to serve the needs of our community by utilizing my gardening skills. We are creating a food force. In this garden that the Seabees dug, we will plant blackberries, blueberries, goji berries, muscadine and satsumas. We couldn't have done this without the Seabees."

"Volunteer service projects always have such a positive impact on our smaller communities within the Navy," says Chaplain Powell. BU3 Pringle shared, "I'm glad I came out. I learned more about gardening and got more involved with the people I'm around every day in a relaxed setting." BUCR M. Johnson concurred saying, "I feel great. Everyone is coming together to accomplish something together. This is something that I'm not used to back home." The Seabees shared about the value of community service. BUCN Buccafuri said, "Whenever the time arises to help out the community, it's always good to take them to get back to the roots that built up the Seabees." BUCN Bosworth summed up the project saying, "Seabees bring the 'Can Do' attitude of getting the job done."

## Gold Star Coordinator Continued

program honors Gold Star Families throughout the year by hosting events that pay tribute to their lost loved ones, providing resources and opportunities to connect with one another and to their Navy family.

Kolenda currently manages more than 1,150 family cases in the five states she services – Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina – which can make it a challenge to meet all of the family members in person. However, during 2018 she was able to maintain contact with all of them, and she was commended for being able to maintain 100% on quality assurance audits and compliance with all applicable instructions in helping the Gold Star family members.

In addition, she was also recognized for the support she provided to the family members of the 13 Sailors who died on Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) in 2017, when the ship was involved in a collision with a container ship that seriously damaged the destroyer. Kolenda provided updates, answering questions and helping to coordinate the one-year remembrance ceremony and family tour that took place onboard the ship in Pascagoula, Miss., in 2018.

Kolenda also was commended for the creativity she employed to raise awareness of and participation in other Gold Star events, such as the Bells Across America ceremony, which pays respect to military service members who died while serving their country.

Barbara Jones, FFSC director at NCBC Gulfport, praised Kolenda for the exceptional service she provided as the Navy Gold Star coordinator.

"We are so fortunate to have Emily as she provides exceptional 'Can Do' services to Navy Gold Star families. Her support to the impacted families from the USS Fitzgerald was stellar," said Jones. "She is considered the star of the region with the largest area of responsibility and is most deserving of the Navy Gold Star Coordinator of the Year Award."

While she greatly appreciated being recognized, Kolenda stressed that she could not have been successful in her position without the support of the people in FFSC, her Gold Star program teammates, and the installation departments onboard NCBC Gulfport.

"All of these people created or encouraged opportunities that allowed me to highlight this program and the people it represents. It is because of them that I received this award," said Kolenda.



**Equipment Operator 3rd Class Jonathan Tinch, a member of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 1 onboard Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, Miss., greets his wife, Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Audrea Tinch, and their five-month-old daughter, Addison, Feb. 4, 2019, after the battalion returned from an overseas deployment in support of United States Africa Command and Central Command operations. This homecoming was the first time Tinch got to meet his baby daughter in person. (U.S. Navy photo by Ryan Labadens/Released)**

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