



MEMORANDUM

To: National Officers, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

From: John A. Biedrzycki Jr., Commander-in-Chief

Date: October 5, 2015

Re: 2015 Trip to England, France and Italy

Background

I departed the United States on August 31, 2015, and traveled to England, France and Italy with Assistant Adjutant General and Washington Office Executive Director Robert E. Wallace. We returned home on September 12, 2015.

The purpose of the trip was to meet with U.S. military personnel stationed in England and Italy, to pay tribute to service members who paid the supreme sacrifice during World War II and are buried in American Battle Monument Commission Cemeteries, and to spend time with VFW comrades.

Takeaways

U.S. Air Force airmen stationed at RAF Lakenheath, England, and at Aviano AB, Italy, and U.S. Army soldiers in Vicenza, Italy, continued to raise concerns that we have been hearing when VFW leaders visit military bases as well as from senior leaders inside the Pentagon.

The budget uncertainty for the Department of Defense and the possibility of a Continuing Resolution and another round of Sequestration are of primary concern to our forces overseas. The concern of a possible government shutdown and the effects on the civilian workforce were expressed by many of those we interviewed.

The lack of a full year's budget raises major concerns with service members about the impact on readiness and modernization as well as on family quality of life programs.

This year we also heard a number of service members question if the elected and appointed officials in Washington really understood what it meant to be in today's military? The operations tempo has not slowed down, yet service members are continually asked to keep doing more with less. While they are not performing as many combat missions as before, they are training allied forces in the former Soviet Bloc States, as well as other nations' militaries. The concerns about dual housing allowances for military-married-to-military couples, pay raises, and not knowing if they will be able to make the military a career after 12, 14 or 16 years due to the downsizing are very real to them. The 1% COLA reduction set to kick in January 2016 for military retirees under 62 was also discussed by a number of service members, but thankfully the House and Senate in their FY 2016 defense bill compromise removed the COLA penalty provision, as well as the dual BAH penalty. Still, a final bill has not yet been presented to the president for his signature.

The service members we met are very mission focused and ready to go into harm's way on a moment's notice. They just do not need these issues and concerns distracting them or their families.

The visits to the Normandy and Sicily/Rome American Cemeteries were experiences I will never forget. Seeing those graves, as well as the beaches where they landed, was very moving, and at the same time reminded me why America and our veterans and service members need a strong and viable VFW. I had the honor of placing wreaths on behalf of the VFW at both cemeteries in tribute to all who are buried in that hallowed ground.

Both American cemeteries, as well as the graves of many others who died overseas during World Wars I and II, are operated and maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission. The Commission and its staff do an outstanding job to preserve the memory and heritage of the sacrifices Americans made for world freedom. I salute and thank them for what they do every day.

Meeting with VFW comrades at a new Post 12143 in England, as well as at our established Post 8862 in Vicenza, Italy, is always a plus for any trip I make. The comrades provide and additional insight and perspective into issues surrounding living overseas.

U.S. Air Force, RAF Lakenheath, England

Our visit to the 48th Fighter Wing was very productive. Their NATO mission coupled with support for U.S. Combatant Commands keeps the operations tempo very high.

We received briefings and visited the 48th Medical Group facility and training site. Mental health and other medical issues were discussed. We also watched computerized training of delivering a baby under combat conditions. Virtually every military assignment in Europe is an authorized family "accompanied" tours, so training for "what if" scenarios is what makes our military so great, and computer simulations are very cost effective.

We were also briefed by the 48th Operations Group and the 48th Mission Support Group. While life for service members and their families in England is overall positive, the concerns of force protection for service members and their families is high. Many of the service members and their families live off-base on the local economy, which creates challenges that need to be addressed, primarily security. We also met with Colonel David Eaglin, Vice Commander, 48th Fighter Wing.

We had the opportunity to lunch with a number of airmen and discuss a variety of topics. The uncertain budget situation coupled with another round of sequestration and its effects on quality of life programs for families was brought up. Doing more with less and the concerns about not being able to reach retirement eligibility due to downsizing were also brought forward. GI Bill transferability and the future of same was also questioned.

Regardless of installation, the uncertainty of not being able to have a future in the military was a hot topic. We were told of airmen with perfect performance records being released due to budget restrictions, many had planned to make the military a career. Their service is an asset to the continuity of military preparedness. Another recurring issue was the Congressional proposal to limit dual BAH for married couples, which House and Senate negotiators just dropped from their compromised defense budget.

I assured everyone that the VFW is the voice of the service members, veterans and their families on Capitol Hill. We will not sit idly by if elected or appointed officials start to cut back on the benefits that we as a nation provide for the less than 1% of our population who volunteer to serve.

Sixty percent of the airmen at Lakenheath were deployed during the month of June. Loud and clear we heard everywhere that they were doing more with less. Less dwell time, less manpower, and the constant uncertainty of budgets and the threat of sequestration topped the list of concerns.

We also discussed the VFW and our programs for service members and their families, and had the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program for separating or retiring service members.

Learn more about RAF Lakenheath at:

<http://www.lakenheath.af.mil/>

Learn more about the 48th Fighter Wing at:

<http://www.lakenheath.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=10661>

Following a full day, we met up with VFW Post Commander Dan McMillan of the East Anglia VFW Post 12143 at Lakenheath's sister base, RAF Mildenhall, who escorted us to a local restaurant where we were able to spend time with a number of his Post members. The majority of members we met with were active duty Air Force. Commander McMillan had been previously stationed in Korea and involved with the VFW there, so when he was reassigned to England he naturally asked where the local VFW was. When told there

wasn't one, he and others created one. We need more active-duty hard chargers like Dan McMillan.

The Post is involved in the community and was gearing up for a 5k and 10k races for a local charity. The members asked questions about the VFW and all present showed enthusiasm about the VFW and our mission. My only regret is that due to the train schedules we were not able to spend more time with these new members.

Normandy American Cemetery, France

We then traveled to the Normandy American Cemetery in France. I had seen pictures of it of course, but nothing except a personal visit can properly express how powerful this hallowed ground truly is. It truly honors the sacrifices of fellow Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve the freedoms we and most of the world enjoy every day. Learning the stories of some of the buried while walking through the cemetery was a very moving experience to me, especially since a number of them were from my home state of Pennsylvania.

The cemetery overlooks the beach that was code named "Omaha." The Americans buried there were part of the initial Allied assault to liberate France on June 6, 1944. Looking out over the water and the beach, one can only imagine the obstacles those brave men had to overcome during the assault, and be very grateful that they did accomplish their objectives, which is still poignantly expressed in the cemetery's guest log by a simply "merci" written by its many French visitors.

The American Cemetery consists of 172.5 acres with 9,387 graves, to include three Medal of Honor recipients and 45 sets of brothers. Also memorialized are the names of 1,557 Americans who continue to be listed as missing in action. We were provided a detailed tour, and had the opportunity to place a wreath on behalf of our VFW at the Cemetery Memorial. My visit to Normandy is one that I will never forget.

Learn more about the Normandy American Cemetery at:

<https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/europe/normandy-american-cemetery#.Vgwu0k03NMw>

Sicily-Rome American Cemetery

From France we traveled to Italy to visit the Sicily/Rome American Cemetery where 7,861 U.S. service members are buried, along with two Medal of Honor recipients and 23 sets of brothers. The majority died in the liberation of Sicily (July 10 to August 17, 1943); in the landings in the Salerno area (September 9, 1943) and subsequent fighting northward; in the landings at nearby Anzio Beach (January 22, 1944); and in air and naval support in the regions. Also memorialized are the names of 3,095 American MIAs from those campaigns.

Seeing the lines of American graves in the cemetery is very moving. Their sacrifice is always remembered thanks to this cemetery, its memorial, and the staff that maintains it as a place of peace, respect and remembrance. We received a tour of the cemetery, walked among the many graves, and also had the opportunity to place a wreath at the Cemetery Memorial on behalf of the VFW.

Learn more about the Sicily/Rome American Cemetery at:

<https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/europe/sicily-rome-american-cemetery#.VgwwUk03NMy>

U.S. Air Force, Aviano Air Base, Italy

Our visit to the U.S. Air Force 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano AB started with a detailed briefing of the fighter wing and its mission to support both U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command. The operations tempo of the wing has not slowed down. Colonel Bryan Wolford, Vice Commander, 31st Fighter Wing was our host for this visit.

We discussed budget concerns to include the impact of a Continuing Resolution, and the possibility of another round of sequestration. We also discussed mental health, quality of life for families, and the challenges families face coming to an overseas duty station with a language barrier for most. Transitioning programs for airmen being released from active duty were also discussed.

We next visited the Passenger Terminal that serves military personnel and their families. Two years ago when VFW visited, we asked about providing WiFi for the terminal, but the Air Force said that the mission of the terminal was changing and not as many service members would be passing through. While the number of service members passing through may have declined, the terminal still services a couple hundred passengers every week, so the lack of WiFi continues to be a quality of life issue. We again extended VFW National's offer to support, and will ask the VFW Department of Europe and local VFW Post 8862 to follow up on this.

I then had the opportunity to be interviewed on AFN Radio as well as have lunch with a number of airmen. The interview was very positive and centered on our visit and the VFW. The first question asked during the luncheon was about what the VFW, VA, DOD and the American public were doing to combat military and veteran suicides? A very interesting and heartfelt conversation followed. We also discussed operations tempo and the uncertainty mid-career service members have about their careers, future benefits, the commissary, and quality of life programs for their families. Budget cuts, sequestration, and the resulting downsizing are issues of major concern to the force. These issues are further compounded by an operations tempo that hasn't slowed down, and the fact they are continually tasked to do more with less. The GI Bill and the transferability option by career service members was also addressed, as well as the 1% COLA penalty.

We also took the opportunity to discuss the VFW and the many programs we conduct for service members and their families, to include the Sports Clip Scholarship for junior enlisted.

We next met with staff at the Family Readiness Center about their Transition Assistance Program, as well as programs for military spouses. We were told that the VA's counselor in Italy is excellent, though they wish the counselor could spend more time with them. We were also informed that service members return to the U.S. for their VA medical examinations prior to being discharged or retired.

Our next visit was to the 31st Medical Group for a tour and briefing. As with most military medical centers, the staff was very proud of their maternity unit. We discussed mental health and had an opportunity to once again see computerized training in action, similar to what we observed at RAF Lakenheath. A difference, however, is that the staff at Aviano take the computer systems to worksites to train staff at their duty location. I found that initiative to be very positive.

Our last stop was at the Aviano Education Center where service members can take course for college credit.

Learn more about Aviano Air Base at:

<http://www.aviano.af.mil/>

Learn more about the 31st Fighter Wing at:

<http://www.aviano.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=4350>

That evening we had the opportunity to attend the monthly meeting of VFW Post 8862. I was very impressed with the attendance, the conduct of the meeting, and the reports given. I had the opportunity to address the members and thank them for what they do every day for their fellow veterans, service members and their families. This Post is truly part of the fabric of the Vicenza military community.

U.S. Army, Vicenza, Italy

Our visit to the U.S. Army at Caserma Ederle began at 6 a.m. for remarks I delivered to the troops and civilians participating in a 5k run of Solidarity in Remembrance of 9/11.

We then met with Wesley Leisinger, Deputy to the Garrison Commander, and other Garrison leadership and discussed a variety of issues that essentially mirrored what we had heard at the other installations. Budget uncertainty and sequestration again topped the list. The Vicenza military community is the home to U.S. Army Africa, as well as the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The base is an Italian military installation, which can create challenges at times. Security on and off the installation is always a concern.

Following our meeting I had the opportunity to swear in five new members into VFW Post 8862, to include the Deputy Garrison Commander and its Command Sergeant Major. These new members were all enthused to be a part of the VFW and especially a member of

Post 8862, because of the great work it does for soldiers and their families stationed in Italy.

Our visit to the Vicenza Health Center was very informative. While not a true medical center, the facility does provide a number of health services for soldiers and their families. It has a number of agreements with local Italian medical centers, and always has the option to send patients to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, if required. We discussed mental health as well as other health related issues.

We next visited the Retirement Services Center and the Warrior Transition Unit. The Retirement Center is manned by VFW members and they assist retirees with VA claims. At the WTU we had the opportunity to have a meeting with three members of the unit who were awaiting medical discharges.

Our next stop was the USO Center. Earlier that morning the director and her husband were part of the group that I had the opportunity to swear in as new members. The USO provides a host of programs for service members and their families. One of which was the 5k run that morning.

We next traveled to Caserma Del Din, the home of the 173rd Airborne Brigade (“Sky Soldiers”). We started with lunch with a number of soldiers where we continued to hear similar concerns about the future of mid-career soldiers, commissary benefits, GI Bill and the future of its transferability, health care, quality of life issues for families, and the uncertain budget environment, to include sequestration.

We also discussed the VFW and how we assist service members and their families, as well as the Sports Clips Scholarship.

We then visited the Indoor Range where I had the opportunity to fire a 9mm pistol. This simulation training is cost effective and allows soldiers to maintain their small arms proficiency. I was very impressed with the range and the manner in which our troops can be trained.

We next met and were briefed by the 173rd Commander Col. Greg Anderson and Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Clark.

Parts of the Brigade are constantly deployed, and readiness and soldier and family support programs must always be in place. The commander emphasized the importance of the U.S. having a forward presence in Europe, which we fully agree with. We also discussed the Russian threat as well as the training missions the Brigade conducts to help the militaries of former Soviet States, and the importance of the NATO Alliance.

The Brigade can deploy within 18 hours and go wherever required in support of EUCOM and AFRICOM requirements. Constant training is vital to mission readiness, which we discussed is constrained by an uncertain budget and even more so by sequestration.

One of the briefing slides showed the reception Brigade soldiers received when they visited another country for training. The local people wave U.S. flags and local and national political leaders all attend. One soldier summed it up by saying the locals feel “America is here; we are now safe.” Very powerful words that sum up what the U.S. military stands for around the world.

Following the briefing we visited the world-class Judd-Metcalf Fitness Center and the Berstein Pool. These facilities are named after three Silver Star recipients of the Brigade who paid the supreme sacrifice. This visit was an excellent opportunity to visit the Garrison as well as meet with Sky Soldiers at their home base.

Learn more about U.S. Army Garrison-Italy at:

<http://www.usag.vicenza.army.mil/sites/local/>

Learn more about the 173rd Airborne Brigade at:

<http://www.eur.army.mil/skysoldiers/BDE/about.html>

VFW Post 8862, Vicenza, Italy

We again spent the evening with members and their families of VFW Post 8862. Words cannot explain how well the Post and their members treated us during our entire visit to Vicenza, from meeting us at the airport to transporting us to all of our meetings, and culminating with a magnificent dinner in our honor. These VFW comrades are great examples of what our organization is all about, and I personally thanked all of them for what they continue to do in the name of our VFW for veterans, service members and their families, and for the many courtesies extended. They are truly an integral part of the Vicenza military community.

Conclusion and Acknowledgements:

This fact-finding trip provided us better insight into the issues our military faces in these uncertain budget times. We pledged to continue to advocate for Congress to pass a budget and to end sequestration, to protect the benefits service members have earned, and to continue our advocacy for the quality of life programs our military and their families enjoy.

Gaining this firsthand knowledge will enhance our interactions with Congress and the administration. Having participated in this trip allows us to speak with authority on the issues.

Meeting and discussing issues with service members and the civilians who work with them is always a very positive experience. None of the service members we talked with were complaining; they were just asking questions and raising concerns. The most telling was that they questioned whether the elected and appointed officials in Washington really understand what it is they do for the nation. I promised to make sure leadership understood their commitment, their sacrifice, and what a forward military presence means to the rest of the world.

America truly has the best, most professional military in the world, and the VFW will continue to advocate that it stays that way. The men and women we met on this trip are mission focused and ready to respond when called on. They have concerns, which are now our issues to help solve.

The visits to the American cemeteries in Normandy and Sicily/Rome were experiences I will never forget. Another thank you goes to the professional staff of the American Battle Monuments Commission for what they do every day.

Meeting VFW members in England and Italy shows the strength of our organization. American service members and veterans residing overseas believe in our great organization, and through their work they continue to keep the VFW in the forefront of our overseas military personnel and their families.

I want to thank officials at the Departments of Defense and State who helped to make this trip a huge success. Special thanks go to the military and DOD civilians we met for what they do every day.

Special thanks go to VFW Post 12143 Commander Dan McMillan and the members of his Post in England for creating the Post, and for getting actively involved in their community.

Special thanks also go to the officers and members of VFW Post 8862 for the friendship and many courtesies extended to us during our visit to the Vicenza military community. I want to especially thank Post Commander Dan Sachs for going above and beyond to make sure we were taken care of, and for his hospitality. To Melvyn Lopez, thank you for ensuring that we were where we needed to be on time and for the friendship. Dennis Salerno, thank you for arranging the winery tour and dinner. And to Bert Gillot, thank you for the excellent protocol work and for your involvement with the VFW.

I recommend that future Commanders-in-Chief consider a trip like this to gain firsthand knowledge of the issues affecting our military personnel and their families overseas.

Thank you for allowing me to represent our great organization on this trip.