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Afghanistan Engineer District – South hosts wounded warriors on Memorial Day

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan – Since 1860, Americans have been observing Memorial Day, the day when we honor the U.S. military members who died in our nation’s service. Some would contend that the focus of Memorial Day has changed over the years, but for the Soldiers and Civilians of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-South, the spirit of honoring Soldiers continues.

District employees celebrated Memorial Day by inviting 12 wounded warriors and their care givers to a brunch prepared by a team of USACE employees. Headed by Norma Dean, the chief of Resource Management, the brunch was prepared in the newly constructed AES kitchen. Immediately following brunch, more than 20 AES employees volunteered the rest of their day off to help prepare a new 10-bed Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI) Recovery Center to receive patients.

Originally the brunch was organized solely for USACE employees and was funded by the AED-South Employee Activity Committee. However, when the AED-South Wounded Warrior Support Committee asked if they could invite several of Kandahar’s wounded Soldiers to the brunch there was overwhelming support.

“We don’t have the opportunities to perform community service here like we do in the States, so cooking a few more servings for today’s brunch was no big deal,” said Dean. While preparing food for USACE employees and the honored guests was a labor of love, it did take a good bit of effort and planning. “We can’t get all of the groceries we needed here on Kandahar,” noted Dean. “We had to purchase some items on the internet, and our muffins and donuts came from Tim Horton’s on the Canadian Compound.”

The Soldiers were treated to two kinds of quiche, egg cups, hash browns, pancakes, cheese grits, blintzes, and homemade cinnamon rolls, plus donuts, muffins, coffee and mock mimosas.

“This is awesome,” said Staff Sgt. Jose Carlos, a medic with the 4th Infantry Division’s 2nd Brigade Combat Team from Ft. Carson, Colo. “These Soldiers have been living in very austere conditions and to be treated to a home-cooked meal shows them they have not been forgotten.” In fact, most of the Soldiers attending the USACE Memorial Day Brunch had been living without running water and in very isolated camps for a while.

“Being invited to observe Memorial Day with the Corps of Engineers here on Kandahar has been a real blessing,” noted Capt. Leah Miller, the mTBI Recovery Center officer in charge and an occupational therapist. Together with Staff Sgt. Danilo Aseron, the mTBI Recovery Center noncommissioned officer in charge, Miller has been busy



Staff Sgt. Danilo Aseron (left) and Capt. Leah Miller (right) of the Role II mTBI Recovery Center on Kandahar Airfield confer with USACE employee, Jeremy Wilson (seated) at the Memorial Day Brunch hosted by the Afghanistan Engineer District-South May 30.

locating a usable facility, and procuring beds, bedding and other necessities to make the recovery clinic comfortable for the patients.

After brunch, Miller, Aseron and more than 20 AED-South employees headed to the recovery center to clean, organize, and prepare the center for patients. “We are so grateful that people from the Corps of Engineers volunteered their valuable time off to help us get this facility up and running,” stated Miller, a native of Dayton, Ohio. “Setting up a new recovery center is a challenge in this environment and to have so much help from the Corps pushed our opening date up by a couple of months.”

Soldiers recovering from mTBI need a different kind of environment than Soldiers recovering from other types of wounds. In all instances though, the goal is to return the Soldier to duty as quickly as possible.

“Since mTBI is the signature wound of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Surgeon General has asked the services to focus on concussion recovery,” noted Aseron. “This recovery center will help speed the recovery of our Soldiers and get them fit enough to return to duty.”

The AED-South learned of the need through a relationship between two Detroit District employees. Christine Weisenberger deployed to Kandahar with AED-S and Angelique Bartreau, an activated Navy Seabee Reservist also at Kandahar. Bartreau’s unit, the Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 26 Seabee Unit, had been supporting the Wounded Warrior Unit; however, they were concerned about continued support after they return to the States this summer. So, Bartreau turned to Weisenberger who also had been supporting the Seabees efforts to continue on. Responding to the need, Weisenberger solicited help from fellow AED-South employees Rita Bocchieri and Susan Fox to organize a new volunteer effort. Through their cooperation, the AED-South Wounded Warrior Support Group was formed.

“This was a fabulous way to spend our day off,” stated Bocchieri. “I’m proud to be a part of the Wounded Warrior Support Group. These young men and women who continue the fight here in Afghanistan are easy to care for.”

Affirming Bocchieri’s comments and covered in a layer of dust and grime, Brett Frazier, deployed to Kandahar from the Huntsville District, summed up the motivation of almost all the USACE volunteers, “because it’s the right thing to do.”

With the support of the AED-South Command Group, USACE will continue its volunteer efforts on behalf of Kandahar’s wounded warriors via its Wounded Warrior Support Group.

The group’s subcommittee chairs include mail support - Sue Fox (as needed for incoming mail and delivery to wounded warrior units); baking birthday cakes for recovering warriors - Rickey Slezak (recovering Soldiers and their caregivers receive a cake on their birthdays); item collection from USACE redeployees - Ray Greenheck (for belts, eye protection and gently used bedding); a college challenge - Rita Bocchieri (campaign to get t-shirts for the recovering Soldiers from U.S. colleges); wish list fulfillment - Jeremy Wilson (working with Guardians of Freedom Project and Wal-Mart Wish List Soldier needs); and protective eyewear support - Randall Lewis (working with Lion’s Club to replace ballistic eyewear lost in injury events).