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Mardi Gras Afghanistan Engineer District-South style

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — What happens when several people from Louisiana are deployed together in Afghanistan and Mardi Gras is just around the corner? At the Afghanistan Engineer District-South, the Mystic Krewe de Kandahar was formed and then a parade, dinner of red beans and rice, king cakes and beignets plus a heavy dose of Cajun-style music and fun materialized Feb. 21.

Spearheaded by Command Sgt. Maj. Lorne Quebodeaux, a native of Iota, La., the krewe of eight which is composed of South District employees primarily from Louisiana, held their first meeting in mid-January to plan the South District's first Mardi Gras event.

“Mardi Gras is a tradition that some of us were unwilling to forego during our deployment here,” said Quebodeaux. I ‘run’ Mardi Gras with the LeJeune Cove Courir on the Saturday before Fat Tuesday. We have a traditional Cajun French chant we sing at every stop,” he said.

Quebodeaux has participated in the Cajun traditional Mardi Gras run since 1982 and the only years he did not participate were when he was on active duty and unable to return home.

According to Quebodeaux, the LeJeune Cove Courir was originally founded around 1900 and involves costumed men visiting neighbors, begging for gumbo ingredients or coins and chasing a live chicken. The Courir went dormant in the 1950s and was revived in 2001 by Gus Gravot.

“We obviously couldn’t recreate a ‘run’ here on KAF,”



Afghanistan Engineer District-South employees celebrate Mardi Gras on Kandahar Airfield Feb. 21 (USACE Photo by Shetab Muneer)



Mardi Gras parade participants prepare to throw beads to parade watchers at Kandahar Airfield Feb. 21 (USACE Photo by Shetab Muneer)

said Quebodeaux, “but having a New Orleans-style parade was a great alternative.”

Part of Quebodeaux’s tradition includes helping the Iota Boy Scouts sell concessions at the Iota/Tee-Mamou Cajun Folklife Festival. “Our troop has one fund raiser a year to fund our activities and we work hard every Mardi Gras to raise the needed funds. So, yes, you could say that Mardi Gras is very important to me.”

The South District continued Quebodeaux’s call for service by treating Kandahar Airfield’s wounded warriors and nearby soldiers to the parade and treats.

“It was fun throwing beads to the airmen and soldiers of KAF,” said Frances Hinkley, the first Mystic Krewe of Kandahar queen. “I’m from the Mobile (Alabama) area, and Mardi Gras is a significant event in my life each year. It’s a time to gather with friends and family, enjoy the parties, parades and good food. This celebration brought Mobile to Kandahar.”

As preparations for the day’s events developed, the krewe scrambled to pull everything together. Sending home for costumes, masks, beads and other items to throw from the make-shift floats was the first order of business for the krewe as there was only one month to get everything organized.

“My wife sent Moon Pies, Mardi Gras potato chips and hundreds of strands of beads, stuffed toys and cups for us to throw to parade watchers,” said Mike Hatchett, deployed from Metairie, La.

Hatchett decorated a float and was also a rider.

Tammy Washington, a Shreveport, La. native, was the krewe member responsible for organizing the floats and marchers.

She canvassed district employees for parade participants, provided the parade music, taught the paraders the basics of marching and outfitted the dance troupes with a variety of costumes, masks, cardboard and colored markers.

“I couldn’t be home for Mardi Gras, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t celebrate,” Washington said. “Getting people together and organizing the parade was hard work but a lot of fun. We had three floats, two dance troupes, a few walkers and a walking float—they all looked great.”

The district’s employees were treated to an afternoon snack of freshly made beignets covered in powdered sugar and then a dinner of red beans and rice and four different kinds of king cake following the parade.



Command Sgt. Major Lorne Quebodeaux (left), Tony Delgado, King Raziq (center) and Frances Hinkley, Queen Zia, pose just before boarding their Mardi Gras float at the Afghanistan Engineer District-South compound on Kandahar Airfield. Delgado and Hinkley were nominated by co-workers and selected to be the district’s first Mardi Gras king and queen. (USACE Photo by Shetab Muneer)

Cooking the food was a collective, team effort that began Monday morning. District employees, augmented by Transatlantic Division employees Gil Kim a Cajun food fan, and Tracy Laventure, from New Iberia, La., shared recipes and swapped stories about past Mardi Gras celebrations.

“Everything tasted like home,” said Penny Coulon, a construction representative and native of Harahan, La. “The beignets were perfect and the red beans and rice were fabulous.”

“We have a lot of construction going on and our employees work very hard throughout the year,” said Air Force Col. Benjamin Wham, the South District commander. “When CSM Quebodeaux suggested celebrating Mardi Gras, I immediately agreed. Getting work done and having fun doing it is important and today was a demonstration of just how to accomplish both.”

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