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To: Lt. Governor's OfficeLtGov@scstatehouse.gov
Date: 4/2/2018 6:44:38 AM
Subject: I'm back from Africa...

My Trip to Africa...

Friends,

I just returned home from Africa where the U.S. Navy hosted Exercise Obangame Express (Obangame means 'together'), the largest naval exercise off the coast of West Africa. Since my service was on a ship, I thought you'd enjoy seeing some photos and learning more about the service of the Sailors aboard the USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20), and what life is like at sea for them.

First, I had to get to Rota, Spain, where I would board the ship, which was currently out to sea. I flew:

Columbia Philadelphia Madrid Jerez

I then made my way to the coastal town of Rota and the Navy base there, and boarded the ship the next day when it pulled into port. The Mount Whitney is the command and control ship of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, which is based in Naples, Italy. The crew is made up of about 150 enlisted Sailors, approximately 15 officers, and 150 civil service mariners with the Military Sealift Command. The ship makes 100,000 gallons of fresh water every day, carries enough food to feed its crew for 90 days, and carries over 1 million gallons of fuel. The ship's two anchors weigh 11 tons each and are attached to 1,080 feet of anchor chain, with each chain weighing 25 tons. The ship generates enough electricity to power a small city!

A large contingent of Sixth Fleet staff joined the ship's crew in Naples and then went to Israel for Exercise Juniper Cobra. When the ship pulled into Rota, much of the Sixth Fleet staff disembarked and more Sailors, such as myself, embarked, including Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 28 (HSC 28). Due to bad weather, we remained in port for an additional day - waves

were 18-20 feet high off the coast (Rota is close to the Strait of Gibraltar) and the captain did not want to take any additional risks for the ship and crew. Below, we passed by the USS Ross (DDG-71) in Rota, which was still in port. It would soon depart on a patrol in the Mediterranean Sea:

Once underway, I tried to immediately get used to the five-hour time difference - and later with European daylight savings time a six-hour time difference with the east coast - and life on the ship.

Everyone reports by 7 am, sometime earlier - and works as late as needed. There are no weekends off on a ship, so Sailors are working 7 days a week. Life on a ship isn't easy, the workload can be demanding and depending on your job, you can be in some pretty challenging surroundings. Even simple things for me took some time getting used to, like having dinner start at 4:30 p.m.

Here are some scenes from the ship:

My stateroom slept two but I had the room to myself; there were two bunk beds, steel cabinets, and one sink:

Hallways in a ship are referred to as passageways and the way to get from one deck to another are by using ladderwells, some of which can be very steep. The ladderwells are covered by hatches and secure, water-tight doors are found throughout the passageways, which can be used to immediately contain any flooding in the ship:

Part of the ship's crew practiced firing flares once we were underway, off the coast of Morocco; as we were headed into waters known for piracy, all precautions were taken:

The wardroom is where officers ate:

As you could see from the photo of my stateroom, there was no television or radio in my room (or anyone else's for that matter, except for the senior officers). But there was a TV in the gym

so I worked out every morning there. We get just 5-6 channels at most; a news station, ESPN, the Armed Forces Network, and two movie channels:

During the exercise, the pilots and crew of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 28 out of Norfolk, Virginia, conducted flight operations - we were usually 70 to 200 miles out to sea off the coast of West Africa - and they would conduct daily missions to and from various Gulf of Guinea countries:

The captain organized an ice cream social one evening after dinner and a steel beach picnic early one Sunday afternoon. These "picnics" are held outside while a ship is underway and gives the crew some down time to relax. In this case, they got to eat grilled hotdogs, hamburgers, and chicken; sides of potato salad and cooked beans reminded the crew of a summer BBQ back home - even though they were sailing off the coast of Nigeria. They even played cornhole and could dress in civilian clothes:

Now, let's get down to business and talk about what the Navy is doing in West Africa. We cruised along from the coast of Morocco down to Gabon, where we dropped anchor. The 19 African nations participating in the U.S.-led exercise included: Cabo Verde, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sao Tome & Principe, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Namibia.

We had 11 American allies join us: Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Morocco, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey. We also had a small contingent of U.S. Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard personnel join the exercise, including active duty and reservists.

The eight-day exercise, sponsored by U.S. Africa Command, focuses on countering the trafficking of illegal arms and drugs, human trafficking, illegal migration, piracy, and illegal fishing. Additionally, maritime interdiction operations and search and rescue training are incorporated as part of the exercise.

Piracy is a serious threat in Western Africa and has a direct impact on our economy and security. A significant portion of crude oil we use comes from this region; pirates attack ships

carrying crude oil, steal it, and then sell it on the black market. They also target supply ships and of course, a U.S.-flagged vessel presents a potentially lucrative target. This has resulted in hijackings, kidnappings, and along with illegal fishing by Chinese vessels, and arms/drug trafficking, the Gulf of Guinea can be a dangerous place for ships carrying oil and supplies to the West.

That is the primary purpose of Obangame Express, to train West African forces to work together so they can effectively cooperate in providing maritime security, providing stability and economic freedom to the region.

I had three articles published during the exercise that helps explains what our Navy was doing in West Africa and why it was important:

[USS Mount Whitney Joins Obangame Express 2018](#)

[HSC-28 Supports Obangame Express 2018](#)

[Successful Obangame Express 2018 Concludes](#)

To conclude, one of the greatest challenges to serving in the National Guard or Reserve is the ability to maintain readiness at all times. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense requires all personnel to receive the yellow fever vaccine before coming to Africa. Well, there is a worldwide shortage of the vaccine and I had to drive up to Greenville and back just for the shot. You also have to take anti-malarial medication every day in Africa and even after you return home.

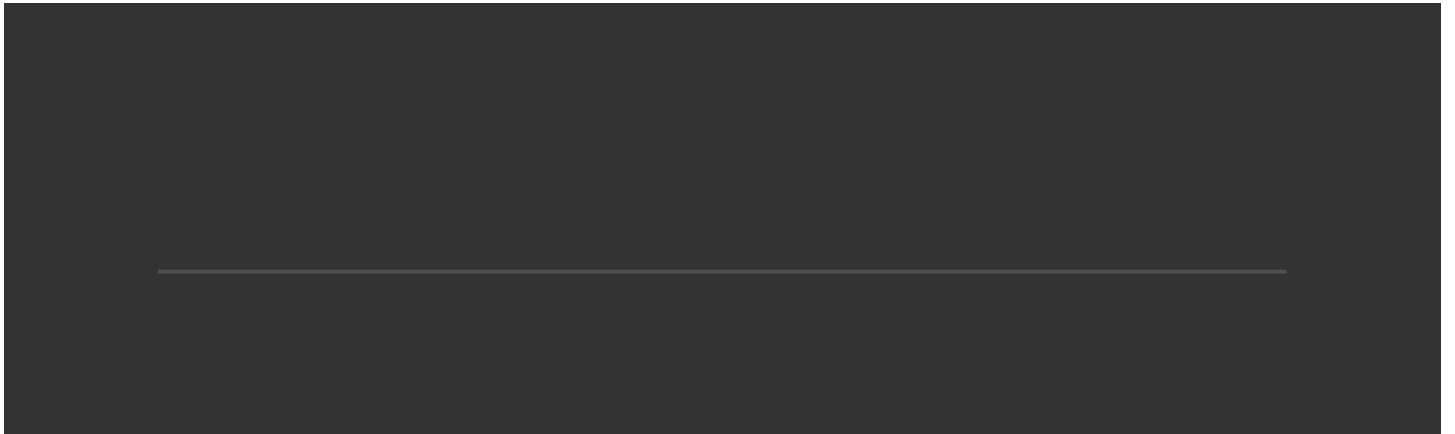
Also, in addition to medical readiness, you have to get up to speed quickly on the mission, the requirements, the planning etc. When you're in theater, no one knows that you're in the Guard or Reserve. They expect you to step up quickly and perform to high standards. For example, when I reported to the ship, I replaced an active-duty public affairs officer from the Sixth Fleet office in Naples, and everyone expects there to be a seamless transition. So I really tip my hat to those who serve - and have served - on active duty because the deployment schedule places so many demands on family members and the service member.

At the same time, I am also much more aware of the challenges and sacrifices those in the S.C. Army and Air National Guard make, and reservists in all the services. It is very challenging to manage a civilian career, military job, and family life, and that takes a lot of balancing to accomplish. It can't be done without family support - so a big thank you to my wife Vatsala for looking after our two girls while I was taking this photo somewhere off the coast of Senegal:.

Please remember to thank a veteran - especially our Navy vets - because they have done so much for our country and they certainly do appreciate that "thank you."

I look forward to talking to you soon!

Regards,
Dino



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