

Desert Times

Spring 2010

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District

Corps activates FEST-A unit in Savannah Team stands ready to deploy worldwide

By Tracy Robillard
Savannah District Public Affairs Specialist

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA - An elite group from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District officially activated Feb. 9 to form one of only eight specialized teams of its kind across the nation. This mobile, engineering support team stands ready to deploy with the Army on missions around the globe.

Known as the Forward Engineer Support Team - Advance, or FEST-A, Savannah's newest team is stationed at Hunter Army Airfield. As part of the 542nd Engineer Detachment, they join the Corps' national FEST-A effort with other teams in Baltimore, Seattle, Los Angeles, Honolulu, New York City, Fort Worth, Texas; and Anchorage, Alaska.

Like other FEST-A units, Savannah's team is a "one stop shop," providing professional solutions to complex engineering problems America's military may face.

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Sgt. 1st Class William Griffith (left), outgoing commander of the Savannah FEST-A, passes the guidon to Col. Ed Kertis (right), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District Commander, during a change of command and activation ceremony at Hunter Army Airfield, Feb. 9. In the background is South Atlantic Division Commander Maj. Gen. Todd Semonite, guest speaker at the ceremony. The new FEST-A incoming commander is Maj. Jared E. Runge, pictured above giving a speech at the ceremony.

FRSG: Advice to families with deployed members



By Justina N. Outlaw
FRSG Member

The deployment of a family member or close friend can be an event that changes the lives of those near and dear to the heart. Generally, emotions are at an all-time high, including feelings of sadness, loneliness

and confusion.

Concerns become intensified with television and news programs portraying such negative images of warfare and violence. But these are not the only stories. Thousands of good-news accounts go unreported by news agencies everyday.

Because deployment affect family members and friends, not just the one leaving on a life-changing journey, it's important to remain hopeful when saying "see you later" to a deployee.

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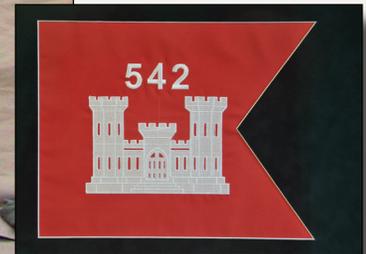
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Five of the eight FESTA members at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif. From left to right: (back row) Lon Lyford, Sgt. 1st Class Griffith, Benjamin Dedjoe. (front row) Pamela Funk and Brett Wiliford. Photo provided by FESTA-A.



Savannah FESTA activated

Continued from front page

Comprised of one officer in charge, a non-commissioned officer and six Corps of Engineers civilians, the team has the capability to deploy worldwide and provide a range of engineering support to military forces – from design, construction management and contracting to real estate, environmental and geo-spatial support.

For example, FESTA teams deploy in the wake of natural disasters to assess structural damage, recommend plans for reconstruction and secure contracts to rebuild.

The team performs similar roles in combat situations, such as assessing war-torn buildings and infrastructure, providing planning and design support and managing re-construction.

“Although this team is only eight people deep, it has unbelievable capability,” said Maj. Gen. Todd Semonite, Commander of the Corps’ South Atlantic Division. “You’ve got a war fighter who understands combat and resourcing and planning; you’ve got an NCO who is an expert in execution on the ground; then you also bring this great depth of disciplines that the Corps’ civilians represent. We have created a team that goes far beyond the talents of eight people – it’s a network of synergy of great importance to our military.”

The Feb. 9 ceremony also served as a change-of-command between former FESTA leader, Sgt. 1st Class William A. Griffith, and newly-appointed officer in charge, Maj. Jared E. Runge.

Griffith chose to name the Savannah detachment the G.A.T.O.R.S., which stands for Global Assistance Team on Request – Savannah.

“The G.A.T.O.R.S. name represents the global awareness that the Corps has in the Army – that is the direction the FESTA organization is going,” Griffith said. “We are combining the power and resources of America’s Army with the expertise and skill of the Corps of Engineers. We are bridging the gap between the organizations, and the FESTA-A is a valuable tool in the mission.”

The FESTA-A civilians are: Lon Lyford, mechanical engineer; Benjamin Dedjoe, electrical engineer; Pamela Funk, contracting specialist; Joel Fuchs, cartographer; Kathy Gaynor, environmental engineer; and Brett Wiliford, civil engineer.

“We are like the technical brains of the mission,” Dedjoe said. “We’re not shooting weapons, but we go out and find engineering solutions in combat or disaster areas, or even during times of peace.” *(continued on next page)*

I I knew it was going to be a challenge because FEST-A is a fairly new concept, but that's what I like about it," Funk said.

"I'm trying to develop the position of a contract specialist in a team of engineers, and sometimes that is a challenge."

Like the civilian team members, the new FEST-A leader is also looking forward to the challenge.

"We are ready to deploy and provide great service wherever the Army may need us," Runge said. "I want the team to prove itself to be so valuable to the military forces and civilian agencies we support, that they wonder how they ever lived without us."

Yet FEST-A cannot look to the future without remembering its past – where Griffith played a huge role.

"All the great things that have happened with FEST-A are because of the hard work of Sgt. 1st Class Griffith," said Savannah District Commander Col. Ed Kertis. "He took the FEST-A from a concept to a reality. In the last two years, he has built the team into a capable unit that is ready to deploy to real-world missions across the globe."

Griffith joined the Savannah District in November 2007 as the sole member of the FEST-A. Before coming to the Corps, Griffith served 17 years with the Army at locations across the country and in Germany. He also deployed to Iraq in 2006 in support of



Maj. Gen. Todd Semonite (left), commander of the Corps of Engineers South Atlantic Division, meets incoming FEST-A commander Maj. Jared Runge and family. USACE photo by Tracy Robillard.

Operation Iraqi Freedom.

As the FEST-A non-commissioned officer in charge and the unit commander, Griffith led the way in finding office space, a motor pool, logistical support and mission essential equipment, as well as trained civilian team members as they were hired to prepare them for upcoming missions. Now, as he prepares for his next Army assignment, Griffith passed the guidon to Runge who will lead the team forward.

"I have big shoes to fill," Runge said

at the change of command. "Sgt. 1st Class Griffith has done a phenomenal job getting this team to where it is today."

Runge, who joined the District in January, has served nearly 10 years as an Army engineer officer with multiple units at Fort Bragg, N.C., and deployed twice to Kuwait and Afghanistan. He holds a bachelor's degree in geography from Brigham Young University, Utah, and a master's in construction management from Florida International University.



Left: Savannah's FEST-A team owns two humvee vehicles, which are capable of deploying to a range of terrains. USACE photo by Tracy Robillard. **Right:** Sgt. 1st Class Griffith (left) looks over an instruction manual with Benjamin Dedjoe (center) and Brett Wiliford during a field exercise at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. Photo provided by FEST-A.

Community thrilled to see Hussein facility demolished

By Alicia Embrey
Gulf Region South District, Public Affairs

BASRA, IRAQ – Demolition started in November on a seven-story building once used by the Saddam Hussein Regime as an internment and interrogation facility. Once demolition is complete, a new Iraq Security Forces Fund (ISFF) \$2.6 million Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) facility will be constructed on the site in Basra province.

According to Ken Bright, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-Gulf Region South project engineer, the community as a whole is happy about the demolition and new construction because the former Saddam Hussein Regime's internment/interrogation facility held bad memories.

"To quote the local Iraqis – many people were taken to the facility for actions that were not pleasing to the Hussein Regime and they never came out alive," said Bright.

"The new construction constitutes a new beginning for the neighborhood. It is part of

rebuilding of Iraq that is getting rid of the bad memories and adding new buildings for the positive future yet to come," Bright added.

Demolition is expected to be complete by April this year with construction of the new compound beginning between June and August 2010.

"The contractor is progressing well and is almost finished with the demolition of the fifth floor of the seven-story building," Bright said.

"Construction of the new Explosives Ordnance Disposal compound is per Gulf Region South's standard facility design," Bright said. "Throughout southern Iraq, it consists of a masonry block perimeter wall with an entry control point, parking area, concrete sidewalk access, an EOD building for approximately 100 explosive technicians, water storage and distribution system, a power generation system and a sewage collection and treatment system."

Completion of the new compound is expected in 2011.



Savannah District deployee Ken Bright (pictured) is a project engineer for the new Explosive Ordnance Disposal facility, which is being constructed in place of this Hussein-era internment facility. Photos courtesy of Gulf Region South District Public Affairs.



From handing out school supplies to visiting children at Iraqi schools, Savannah District deployee Ken Bright has learned there is much more to deploying than construction.

Never a Dull Moment

By Ken Bright
Savannah District Deployee
Gulf Region South District, Iraq

BASRA, IRAQ - I have now been in the country for almost 10 months, and I can honestly say, there has never been a dull moment. It has been one of the most dynamic environments I have ever worked in. Meanwhile, the \$230 million construction program at my Resident Office continues to be a challenge every day.

“There’s something about beautiful little children that paints the humanitarian picture of the war in the most compelling way!” - Ken Bright

Understanding the extremely high amount of poor conditions that still engulf the majority of the city of Basra and outlying areas, I can take solace in the fact that I have contributed to the re-building of Iraq. Through the projects I have worked on and through the Iraqi Nationals that I have been fortunate enough to work with, I have assisted with Iraq’s quest for freedom and democracy in ways I never thought possible.

I have been fortunate enough to work on hospitals, health clinics, police stations, shoreline pier construction, barracks, office administration facilities, sewer sanitation networks and other water treatment systems for the Iraqi Military and Basra. It truly gives me a sense of pride knowing that, in some way, I have positively contributed to a cause that will positively affect Iraq and the world.

One of the major highlights of my tour in Iraq was my visit to a Sant Efram kindergarten class in

Basra. The visit to this kindergarten class was simply overwhelming.

There’s something about beautiful little children that paints the humanitarian picture of the war in the most compelling way! This visit truly pulled on my heart strings to the point that it was all I could do to hold back tears while being around these beautiful gifts from God. Just to think, we could have been born in Iraq and live with these stark realities everyday. It makes me want to just pick them all up at once and give them a big hug, just like you hug your own children.

On top of what we are doing for the Basra Iraqi infrastructure as part of our daily duties here, my hope was to show these beautiful little ones that we not only have love for our children back home but, we also have love for them too.



While deployed, Ken plays online games with his son, Ivan (pictured) via webcam. “This was the key to my sanity while in Iraq,” Ken said. “To Ivan, my wife, Judy, and me, Skype was the next best thing to being there with my family.”



Let's Get Warm and Fuzzy

Savannah group knits hats for deployed troops

By Dennis Lindemeier
Savannah District Deployee
Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

BAGRAM AIR BASE, AFGHANISTAN - You never know whose heart you will touch, or how far their love will reach when you first write an article about a mission, an endeavor or an adventure. I have had a wonderful response thus far as a result of the story that first appeared in this quarterly newsletter in the winter of 2009-2010, a story about Operation Care. I've been helping Operation Care to collect much-needed items for our deployed service members and Afghans in need.

So far I have received several shipments. A dentist in Hutchinson, Minn., recently sent a nice box of dental supplies; and one of my sisters collected a box of clothing for Afghan women and children. I have received other packages as well that have since been distributed to Soldiers and Afghan citizens.

But recently, I received a batch of donations that caught my attention in an interesting way. This donation was inspired by a comment I used in my last story from Sgt. Charles Dostal. When asked what he and his fellow Soldiers needed from Operation Care, he replied, "basically anything to help keep us warm through the coming winter."

You never know what the words of a Soldier will bring your way. A short time later, an E-mail from someone back home in Savannah District landed in my in box. The message was from Judy Wood.

"Regarding the comment about the Soldiers wanting anything to help keep us warm through the winter, my friends and I knit Army-approved helmet liners (made of wool yarn that matches their uniforms, and that doesn't show when the helmet is worn). Do you need these?"

A short couple of weeks later upon my return from Forward Operating Base Shank, I found Judy's first shipment containing a wonderful variety of knit helmet liners, in various shades of green and brown - all officially approved colors for Army and Marine troops to wear. But these were not just any helmet liners, these were knit by a small group of ladies associated with a Savannah



National Guard Soldiers at Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, enjoy the knit caps sent to them from District team member Judy Wood and her friends at Unwind Yarn and Gifts. The caps were made with a blend of merino sheep wool and opossum hair (pictured top left), which is warmer than regular wool. Photo provided by Dennis Lindemeier.

shop called Unwind Yarn and Gifts. They were made of 100 percent merino sheep wool and combinations of merino and opossum.

As Judy said, "Yep, that's opossum. We're going to have some folks called possum heads," referring of course to the troops wearing the helmet liners she knit.

As Judy related to me, "Years ago, someone introduced opossums to New Zealand. They multiplied, out-competing local species, and now they are a real

problem. The New Zealanders are trying to find uses for them. They found that the soft tummy hair, when spun with merino sheep wool, creates incredibly warm clothes with all the characteristics of regular wool, but warmer."

I would like to personally thank the women of Unwind Yarn and Gifts, including Judy Wood, Barb Phillips, Nancy MacKenzie and Margaret Chouest for their generosity. They knit love into each of these wonderful articles of clothing to help keep our troops warm.

Unwind Yarn and Gifts in Savannah, Ga., collects an estimated 100 knit caps every month for deployed troops. For more information on their effort, contact the shop at (912) 303-3970 or to.unwind@yahoo.com.

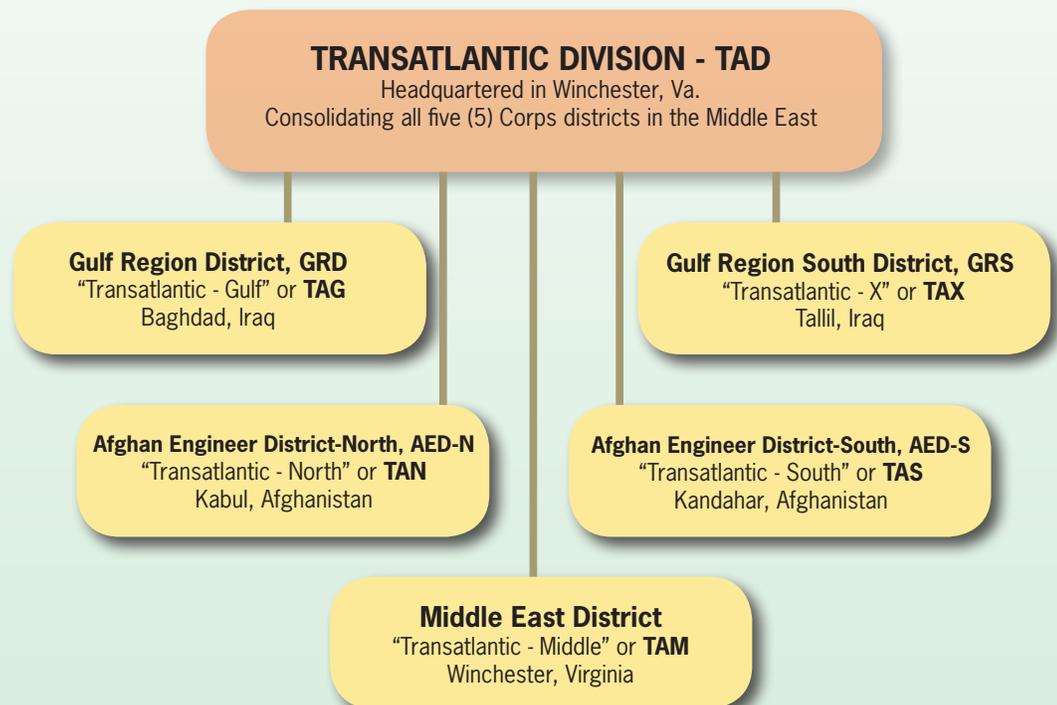
Meet your Family Readiness Support Group



These friendly faces are the members of Savannah District's Family Readiness Support Group, geared up to provide assistance to deployees and their families. From left to right: Savannah District Deputy Commander Lt. Col. David London, Tyrone Williams, Paul Hammett, Brenda Hill, Michael Rusden, Gwen Myers and Diane Hudson. Another member is Justina Outlaw (pictured on front page).

New Transatlantic Division brings new acronyms

Did you know the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers organization of divisions and districts in the Middle East have changed? That means new acronyms! Since the Gulf Region Division was de-activated in October 2009, the new Transatlantic Division now stands in its place and has consolidated all other districts in the Middle East. The new Transatlantic Division - also referred to as TAD - is headquartered in Winchester, Va. The five districts that are now part of TAD also have new Transatlantic acronyms, as illustrated in this chart:



FRSG: Coping with deployments

Continued from front page

So how do you cope with the feelings and emotions of a loved one's deployment? How do you not grow cold with detachment and resentment? Or, simply put, how do you survive?

There are many healthy and fun ways to cope with the deployments. I know you may think the future looks bleak, but with the tips below, you'll see a brighter future; and one step at a time, day-by-day, you will see that it gets easier, and you are closer to welcoming home your deployed loved one.

Listen.

Take the time out to listen to one another. It's often scary for both parties to think about how their lives will change without one another for an extended length of time. Listening and understanding can play a major role in overcoming these fears. It's also a great time to come up with positive ideas on how to counteract the negative thoughts together.

Write.

Keep a journal. Surprisingly, writing down your thoughts and emotions can channel more positive ways to cope with a loved one being deployed. Writing offers you the chance to be creative, and most of all, honest. Whether you're having a good day or not; write it down. Over time, you'll see how your emotions have changed and how you've come to understand them better. Also, you may want to share these emotions and feelings at your discretion.

Explore.

We're all good at something, so explore your abilities. Discover a hidden talent like painting, dancing, cooking, arts and crafts; whatever it may be, take a chance. While your loved one is deployed, you have to keep busy. Find something to do that you really enjoy, and you can share this new-found talent. Focusing your time and energy on other activities can serve as an outlet while your loved one is away.

Routine.

Keep a steady routine. Although a family member or loved one is deployed, try to maintain a schedule or routine that is sufficient for you and other members of your family. Familiarity can be very comforting.

Contact.

Talking with your loved one every chance you get is important. Keep the lines of communication open. There are so many ways to stay in touch with someone in your life who's deployed. Modern technology has made that an even greater possibility. Explore options like Facebook, Skype, MySpace and e-mail. Many overseas locations also offer telephone service. And an old-fashioned, hand-written letter can bring long-lasting joy. Communication is a vital key to a healthy relationship, so near or far, stay in touch.

Support.

Join a family support group. I know, I know, a support group sounds like a meeting where individuals sit around and discuss issues, but that is a common misconception. A support group is a collection of individuals experiencing similar emotions and feelings. They can share and exchange healthy coping mechanisms as well as uplift each other's spirits through sharing, caring and understanding. It's important to surround yourself with positive people who are familiar with what you are going through. In the end, you will have the support you need, whenever you need it.

To become a member of Savannah District's Family Readiness Support Group, contact the group's leader **Diane Hudson** at **912-652-6124** or **Diane.G.Hudson@usace.army.mil**.



Savannah District deployee Jim Myers and his wife Loreene enjoy a special lunch at the Fort Gordon Area Office Christmas Party. The celebration was part of the Family Readiness Support Group's efforts to coordinate family activities with deployees. Photo provided by FRSG.