

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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### CONFERENCE BRINGS FAMILY READINESS TEAM MEMBERS FROM ACROSS EUROPE TOGETHER FOR TRAINING, NETWORKING

**HEIDELBERG, Germany** -- Just a few months ago, Sgt. 1st Class Rick Littlejohn was patrolling the streets of Ramadi with a military transition team from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. He likes to say that although the team was “blown up many times,” they never lost a member.

Today Littlejohn is a rear detachment NCO with U.S. Army Europe’s 172nd Separate Infantry Brigade. Over small talk in the lounge at the Revita Hotel I asked him which job he’d rather have.

He doesn’t hesitate. “No contest! I’d rather be on the MITT team!” he said emphatically. Rear detachment work is tough, he adds; far more complicated and demanding than being a tanker in Iraq -- and it never stops.

“That rear detachment commander is *always* working,” Littlejohn said.

The sergeant was at the Revita, a five-star concrete staircase of a hotel straddling the Oder River in the foothills of Germany’s Harz Mountains about three hours north of Frankfurt, to join more than 170 of his fellow Family readiness team members from



BILL ROCHE

Nancy Gaskins, an Army spouse, motivational speaker, author, and consultant shares ideas about leadership with Family readiness team members from across Europe during the U.S. Army Europe and Installation Management Command-Europe Family Readiness Conference in Bad Lauterberg, Germany April 18. More than 170 participants from across Europe attended the three-day conference.

across Europe for a conference designed to train participants while helping them network and share ideas.

Col. Armon Cioppa, chief of the military plans and policy division of USAREUR's personnel directorate, called the April 16-18 conference "an historic event" that brought Family readiness experts from across USAREUR and the Installation Management Command-Europe together for training for the first time.

Cioppa's chief of Soldier and Family readiness, Maj. Heidi Whitescarver, was one of the primary organizers of the event. Whitescarver said IMCOM-E and USAREUR Family program officials found that when one group conducted a training event, some experts from the other group were usually involved.

"So we thought we should do this together, because it truly is a 'whole team effort'," the major said. "It's commanders, rear detachment commanders, it's Family Readiness Group leaders, and the Family Readiness Support Assistants. So what better idea than to bring all those groups together so they hear all of the information at the same time in the same place, and then they can have discussions on the side about how they're going to implement this back in their groups, back at their units."

Jane Helfrich, community life specialist for IMCOM-E Army Community Service and another of the conference coordinators, said it takes USAREUR – "the mission side of the house" where the FRsAs and rear detachment commanders work – and IMCOM-E and its garrison and Army Community Service experts that train and support FRG leaders, to complete the family support picture.

"So they're the Family readiness team across the theater, and there hasn't been an opportunity to bring those people together jointly, to network and learn together. So that's why we wanted to do this conference," Helfrich said.

Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Farley of the U.S. European Command gave the conference's keynote address. He told the group that the Army's senior leadership understands that "Family readiness equals mission readiness," and vowed that positive changes being made in family programs will endure.

He cited the Army Family Covenant as one proof of that endurance.

"The Army Family Covenant. What a brilliant idea -- and they gave us money," he said. "Whoo hoo!"

The sergeant major said proof of positive change can be seen in many other initiatives as well, such as funding of Family Readiness Support Assistant positions; increased training for Family readiness personnel; a stronger emphasis on unit rear detachments; the recently announced return to 12-month combat deployments; and quality of life improvements. One example of how EUCOM is helping is by fighting for more Department of Defense Dependents Schools funding for Europe, which Farley said

currently includes 55 percent of DoDDS students, but gets only 15 percent of DoDDS funding.

Over the conference's three days subject-matter experts from USAREUR, IMCOM-E, the Europe Regional Medical Command, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, and other Army and private organizations presented participants with a mountain of information. Their topics covered a wide range of Family readiness programs, resources and issues, including the roles and responsibilities of family readiness personnel and agencies; FRG funding, ethics and legal issues; minor Traumatic Brain Injury, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, behavioral and mental health concerns and grief; survivor outreach services; effective communication; helping with marriage and family concerns; and spouse employment. Attendees were offered links to dozens of Web sites and agencies that provide support and services to Army families.

Along with that training and discussion came some announcements of program improvements that directly affect Army families in Europe.

Holly Gifford of the U.S. Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command, who offered attendees a long list of family resources, also told them the Army has approved more than 1,000 permanent FRSA positions for fiscal year 2010.

"This is a success story. It took a long time, and we got it," Gifford said.

But she didn't stop there. The Army has also approved funding for 477 permanent Army Community Services positions worldwide, Gifford added.

Helfrich said 74 of those ACS jobs will fill identified needs at garrisons across Europe.

ERMC's Col. Angela Pereira, who spoke to participants about Soldier and Family member mental and behavioral health issues, outlined several new initiatives, including \$14.9 million ERMC will receive from the Army Medical Command to add 64 new behavioral health providers at Army treatment facilities Europe-wide.

Whitescarver noted that the conference's organizers are aware that the event presented a huge amount of information to participants in three days, and while attendees won't remember it all, they'll know where to go to get it.

"We want them to be a connection to the resources that are available, so we want the Family Readiness Group leaders and the Family Readiness Support Assistants to know where to go or where to send things for the actual information they can use," she said. "We don't expect them to be the one that can solve every problem, but they need to be fully aware of what is available in their community."

"I would hope that they are coming together in their communities to share best practices," she added. "However, we're very geographically dispersed in USAREUR, unlike for any other location except for maybe the Pacific, so (the conference) lets people from

Bamberg share with Italy, for example. Maybe something has worked in Hohenfels and can be shared with Wiesbaden.”

“I hope ... that people come away more impassioned and encouraged about the work that they’re doing ... that they want to go back and do it better,” Helfrich said.

For Eva Garrett, mobilization and deployment program manager for U.S. Army Garrison Hohenfels, just that kind of connection was indeed taking place. She said she felt re-energized by the conference and that while the event was still ongoing she and several of her colleagues who also attended were planning to get together at home to brainstorm.

“We have a great team network of folks here that are taking back the same information that I have ... what a great team,” she said.



BILL ROCHE

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Michael E. Strohm, Family life chaplain for U.S. Army Garrison Heidelberg, discusses helping couples and families deal with deployment-related issues during the U.S. Army Europe and Installation Management Command-Europe Family Readiness Conference in Bad Lauterberg, Germany, April 17.

The Baumholder, Germany-based 2nd Brigade Combat Team is just beginning its third deployment to Iraq, and Lt. Col. Raymond Rigsby said he just assumed command of its rear detachment -- known as “Task Force Rock” -- with his promotion in March. Rigsby said being a “rear D” commander is “a steep learning curve,” but noted that he has two tools to help -- “pages of

thoughts” from the conference to share with the task force when he gets home, and a solid rear detachment team.

“I know it’s a daunting task, but I’m ready to do it with the team I have assembled,” Rigsby said.

“The issues, the problems that come up -- and they will come up -- if they’re dealt with back here by a competent team, the downrange Soldiers and commanders remain focused on the fight there, and (do) not have to worry about the problems that could arise back here,” the colonel added. “The determination of whether I’m a success or a failure is based on how I handle things back here, so they don’t show up down there as problems, because they’re going to have enough to worry about.”

“There’s a bag full -- a rucksack full -- of things we have no control over. But there are things we have control over ... and we put our energy into those things,” said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Michael E. Strohm, Family life chaplain for U.S. Army Garrison Heidelberg. Strohm’s presentation at the conference focused on helping couples and families deal with deployment-related issues.

“Deployments are long, but they’re not forever,” the chaplain added. “The war at home is the war you can win.”

As the wife of a Soldier as well as the USAREUR personnel directorate’s FRSA program manager and one of the conference’s organizers, Gabriela Galvin was one of several attendees who live on both sides of the subject of Family readiness. As an Army spouse, Galvin said, she believes that if families know where to go for information when their Soldiers are deployed, and can turn to Family support experts in their unit or community who have the right answers, then deployed troops won’t be worrying about their families.

If the conference could deliver one message, Galvin added, it should be directed to Soldiers and Family members.

“They’re not alone,” she said. “They’re not just one Soldier. They’re not just one Family member, just one spouse. They’re not just one brother or sister. It is a family. It is an Army strong family, and I hope they understand that they’re not alone.”



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