Trustee Yee enjoys a taste of home during his Middle East deployment

By GARRETT YEE
Contributing writer

Editor’s note: Garrett Yee is a trustee on the Ohlone College Board and is currently serving in the Army.

After June flying by so fast, July seemed to move somehow slower.

We have had a lot on our plate lately and so not only are the days long, but the weeks are long as well.

Capt. Torres has us “volunteering” about one hour each week when we are in town helping to make fuel doughnuts that are given away to local Afghan families to use for cooking and to keep warm during the winter.

These fuel doughnuts are made from shredded paper and sawdust mixed with water, then compressed.

On July 4, we celebrated Independence Day with our Task Force 236 Afghanistan team in Kabul.

I’m not sure where these guys get the steaks, but what a great change from our normal chow hall meals! I always enjoy a barbecue back home so to have a barbecue here in Afghanistan was a treat.

We also got a visit from Col. Andre Wiley, our new operations officer down in Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. Wiley is a great addition to our team at the 335th Signal Command.

We also presented our Air Force Engineering and Installation team with the 335th Signal Command combat patch on Independence Day.

Over the past year, we have been working closely with our Air Force brothers and sisters to bring communications to Afghanistan and so awarding the 335th combat patch is a way of reaffirming that close bond.

The big event back home that I missed was my father’s birthday. My father is the biggest fan of his three children, Grace Anne, Garrett (me) and Brendan, even to this day.

After spending some time in Kabul putting out fires (figuratively), I had to head down to Kuwait for the change of command for the 335th Signal Command.

On July 16, our drive team picked us up very early in the morning to take us to the Kabul airfield where we caught an Australian C-130 airplane down to Kandahar Air Field.

After spending the day at Kandahar helping to load our cargo to the air terminal at 8:15 p.m. and wait for our C-17 flight to take off.

We landed at the Kuwait International Airport later that morning where the two caskets, each covered tight with a United States flag, were ceremoniously moved off of the airplane.

I said a short prayer to myself for the families of these two fallen comrades.

After the layover, we then continued to Ali Al Saleem Airfield in Kuwait where our drive team picked us up and took us on a two-hour trek to Camp Arifjan.

It was a long night traveling, but a stark reminder of just how lethal the environment remains in Afghanistan.

The temperature on our first day in Kuwait was 125 degrees.

In the late evening around 9 or 10 p.m. when the heat dropped down to just over 100 degrees, a few of us gathered at the gazebo near where we stayed to relax.

The Change of Command for the 335th Signal Command went well. A change of command is when one commander passes the command to another to take over as its new leader.

In this case, the leadership transitioned from Brig. Gen. Jones (one-star general), who has been in command while deployed for 15 months, to Maj. Gen. Smith (two-star general), my new boss.

I am thankful to have been able to work for Jones these past nine months that I have been deployed so far — she has been a great leader to all of us in the 335th Signal Command here in Southwest Asia.

I look forward to working with Smith during the remaining portion of my deployment here in Afghanistan.

The next morning, Maj. Majewski, Capt. Torres and I got picked up at 3:30 a.m. to head for the Ali Al Saleem Airfield to catch a small C-12 airplane all the way back to Kabul.

We could only take three passengers due to distance and weight. Our flight was fairly comfortable with stops in the United Arab Emirates and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan for refueling.

Once back in Kabul, we got picked up by our drive team and drove back “home” to Camp Phoenix.

Back at our base camp, it felt good to sleep in our own bed after traveling for the past week. We spent the rest of the month of July in Kabul taking care of business locally.

Although there were places that we needed to visit, the second part of July was the month that we needed to stay close to our headquarters.

This gave us an opportunity to fall into a somewhat normal routine for a period of time.

This is not to say things were quite—in fact quite the opposite. The reason we stayed close to home was all of the work we needed to do in preparation for major changes ahead and to begin preparation for the next rotation that replaces us in the fall.

As I sit down to close out this letter, it has been over nine months since I left my home and family in California back in October 2011.

During that time, I’ve spent time in Iraq in support of Operation New Dawn, transitioned to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and spent time in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

As a senior Army officer responsible for supporting communications requirements in southwest Asia, there is never enough time, resources or personnel but we make it work in an austere and often times very dangerous environment.

This has been an incredible experience and I am most thankful for my family and the great team of soldiers and airmen that I have the honor and privilege to work with each and every day while I’m deployed.