

Corps of Engineers aids transition for wounded warrior

BY RACHEL PARKS

Sentinel Staff

When new buildings are constructed on Fort Hood for Soldiers, civilians and families, it's up to the employees at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to run samples of concrete, asphalt, soil and masonry through a battery of tests to make sure the construction is of the highest quality.

When Staff Sgt. James Taylor, A Company, 2nd Battalion, Warrior Transition Brigade, joined the military as a field artilleryman in Sept. 2004, he never imagined that he would one day have a part in the Corps of Engineers quality assurance process.

But after medical issues brought Taylor to the Fort Hood WTB, he decided to take part in the Vocational Reintegration Program, an internship program designed to transition wounded warriors from the military to the civilian workforce. That brought him to the Corps of Engineers quality assurance office at Fort Hood.

"The Corps of Engineers was very receptive to the program and offered an opportunity to mentor and train in quality assurance and material testing," Ron Harris, the supervisory materials QA, said.

For more than four month, Harris has been Taylor's civilian boss at the internship. He said Taylor jumped right into the fray and quickly picked up the technical aspects of the job.

"I think it's been a good experience for him," Harris said. "It's given us the additional manpower and it's given us a chance to pay back those Soldiers who have been wounded."

One of the shared goals of the VRP and the Department of Defense initiative, Operation Warfighter, is to help wounded warriors gain employment at federal agencies once they transition out of the services. Harris said that looks like a good possibility



Staff Sgt. James Taylor, WTB, prepares to run tests on a soil sample at the Corps of Engineers Quality Assurance Office at Fort Hood. Taylor has taken part in an internship for wounded warriors at the office for more than four months.

Photos by Rachel Parks, Sentinel Staff

for Taylor.

"I've already had some contractors who have expressed interest in hiring him. If that happens, it's a win-win for everybody," he added.

Harris said he and the other employees at the office have been happy to pass on their knowledge to Taylor. "Our number one mission is to make him marketable as he transitions to the workforce."

Those who see Taylor at work might think he's been at the office for years as he deftly moves through

the different stations, testing the saturation levels for asphalt and the strength of concrete samples. He said it hasn't always been so



Staff Sgt. James Taylor, WTB, tests the strength of a concrete sample at the Corps of Engineers Quality Assurance Office at Fort Hood. Taylor has been with the agency for more than four months.

smooth.

"When I came over here I knew absolutely nothing," he said. But with mentorship from the civilians he picked up quickly. "Now I know how to run various tests. Working in the field I've made a lot of contacts and met a lot of good people," he added.

Taylor said taking part in the internship moved him out of the rut he was in as he faced the prospect of leaving the Army.

"I love my job in the military but since I have to medically retire, this is actually kind of like a therapy for me," he said. "It's actually been a stress reliever."

Sergeant 1st Class Kevin Burgin, the VRP noncommissioned officer in charge, has also seen a change in Taylor since he began working at the Corps of Engineers office.

"He's totally different from the first day I talked to him," Burgin said.

Burgin said if wounded warriors can spend several months in an internship program, developing skills for their resume or making civilian contacts, it can have a profound effect on their healing.

"The first step in helping them heal is getting them out of the medical environment," he added. "It gets them out of uniform and it gets them some exposure to specialized experience. That brings the stress down because they see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Taylor is one of dozens of wounded warriors at Fort Hood who have proven that the internships work and he's a staunch supporter.

"I would highly recommend the program," he said. "It has all been very interesting."



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- Ron Harris



Dual military Army family adapts, improvises, overcomes hardships

BY ELOISE LUNDGREN

OTC Public Affairs

Married couples who are both active-duty military personnel know what it means to walk a mile in their partners' shoes. Or perhaps a better word would be "boots."

Kevin and Natalia Palumbo have been married 10 years and have two sons. Now they have one more thing in common: deployment. Currently in Kuwait, 1st Lieutenant Natalia Palumbo is an operations officer and public affairs officer for the 553rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 4th Sustainment Brigade, 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary).

Sergeant 1st Class Kevin Palumbo is the assistant operations non-

commissioned officer in charge in the U.S. Army Operational Test Command's G-3. His last deployment was with the 3rd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division in 2009. Trading places with his wife to play Mr.

Mom has proven to have its own unique challenges.

"I freely admit that one of the toughest assignments I've had is caring for Anthony (nine years) and Sebastian (17 months) by myself in the few short months Natalia has been deployed," he said.

"We stay connected through e-mails, letters and phone conversations, but it's not the same for the boys as having mom

here.

"And it's not the same for me either," he admitted.

The 553rd CSSB, also known as



Courtesy photo

Sergeant 1st Class Kevin Palumbo and his wife, 1st Lt. Natalia Palumbo pause for a photograph with their two sons. This dual military couple has been married for 10 years, balancing family life with Army life and numerous deployments.

the Leopard Battalion, keeps Natalia busy.

"Our mission is to provide logistical support to the Iraqi theater of operations and ensure the responsible drawdown of Soldiers and equipment," she said. "Our intent is to be the best stewards possible of taxpayers' dollars, minimizing waste and capitalizing on sound manage-

ment principles."

This is the first opportunity Natalia's had to serve as a PAO. "I'm finding it challenging, yet rewarding," she said.

According to Natalia, Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation provides music concerts, movies, video games, a pool room, internet café and a lounge where Soldiers can go

to unwind.

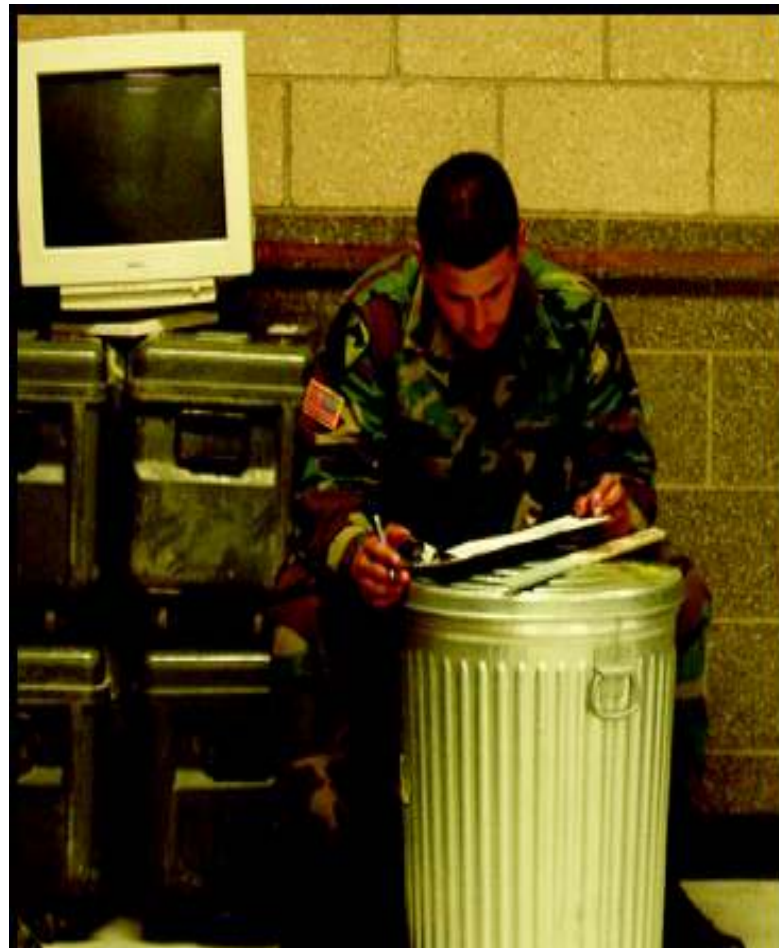
"We also have two physical fitness centers with a swimming pool, tennis court, racquetball court and football field," she said. "Additionally, we have an education center that offers distance learning programs so Soldiers can get college courses out of the way."

"It's not like we don't have enough to do, both with work and leisure time," Natalia said. "It's just that nothing truly fills the void of being away from your family."

"The e-mails, letters and phone calls help," she said, "but I certainly am looking forward to my two weeks of R and R this summer."

Meanwhile, back at the house, Kevin, Anthony and Sebastian are doing their best to keep mom's morale high.

"The boys work hand in hand with me to write Natalia every week and send frequent care packages," Kevin said. "We don't intend to let long distance get in the way of the Palumbo family staying strong and committed to our future together."



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