

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL (RET.)
ALEXANDER JEFFERSON OF THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN AND U.S. AIR FORCE MAJOR GENERAL
ANDRA HIGGS VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: TRAVELS TO QATAR AND KUWAIT TO VISIT
WITH U.S. AND COALITION FORCES TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2009

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's
Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, April 24th, 2009. My name is Lieutenant
Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs,
and I'll be moderating this call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line, please clearly state your name and
organization you're with prior to asking your question.

And today our guests are a Tuskegee airman, retired Lieutenant Colonel
Alexander Jefferson, and U.S. Air Force Major Andra Higgs. And they will be
talking about their travels to Qatar or -- (changes pronunciation) -- Qatar,
Iraq, Kuwait -- COL. JEFFERSON: Mm-hmm.

LT. CRAGG: -- to visit with U.S. forces, joint and coalition forces to
thank them for their services.

So without further ado, I'll turn it over to both of you, whoever would
to start first. Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson, if you'd like to go ahead and
start.

COL. JEFFERSON: Surely. Surely. Well, it was a pleasure to be
introduced and invited to come to Qatar and listen to troops and experience the
things that have gone on since we started the 332nd Fighter Group. I used to
say "umpteens years ago," but it was an inspiration to see these young people
carrying on the tradition of the 332nd Fighter Group and the Expeditionary Wing.

We've had an extensive tour through security, the group, the missions.
And it's been inspiring to see the young people rising to fill these positions
of authority. I've been very impressed, and I feel very strangely that we
believe this country is in pretty good hands, to see what these young people are
doing and how they are accomplishing their mission. It's been inspirational to
me.

Now, I know the rest of the -- there are three other Tuskegee airmen
also in attendance: Colonel Warren, there's Sergeant Boyd, and Major -- who was
the other one? No, Major Boyd and Sergeant Broom.

It's --

MAJOR HIGGS: This is the second journey that we've had with two separate groups of original Tuskegee airmen, four each in each group. And it has been a magnificent experience to see how the U.S. Armed Forces -- (audio break) -- connects so well with the current-day warfighters from all branches and all components of the service. It really in many instances is connecting the heritage to the horizon.

But it also is inspiring our young people and our current forces that the way forward in terms of how not -- how not only do you do the very best you can in a deployed warfighting environment, but how you take those great skillsets back in your communities and become better citizens and help to raise the stock of people all over the planet.

So I'm absolutely honored to be here. I'm absolutely honored to take part. And I can't say enough about what I've seen in how the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen, the Marines, the Coasties are -- (inaudible).

In fact, we had a visit today from a Navy captain who visited with the airmen today, and he said that he wanted to just stop by and thank the heroes upon whose shoulders we stand. And he said that we do an exceptional job of honoring people after they've gone on, and we stopped by their gravesites to place a lily at their -- COL. JEFFERSON: Mm-hmm.

MAJ. HIGGS: -- resting in place. But he says it's great to see flowers placed upon people while they're alive. And in this instance, the airmen's visit has really been about the airmen coming to thank the troops for their great --

COL. JEFFERSON: That's the bottom line, exactly.

MAJ. HIGGS: -- defending and believing in our way of life.

So it's really been an eye-opening experience for me to see such incredibly sharp people and to have them connected to the elders who got us.

Q (Now ?) the conference?

LT. CRAGG: I'm sorry?

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: Do you move on to questions now, sir?

COL. JEFFERSON: Oh, yes, another question.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go ahead and move on to Chuck Simmins. Chuck, please go ahead. The floor is yours.

Q All right. Good evening, gentlemen. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal.

First of all, thank you both for your service to our country. It is much appreciated.

My question -- my first question is for Colonel Jefferson. As you move among the troops, could you draw some comparison on living condition and off-duty things that the troops do that compare to what you and yours did back in World War II?

I realize and -- very much aware that these young people are much more educated as to the current conditions and current times. We must remember that they are the product of the electronic age. But at the same time, I could surmise that they, too, are under pressure to succeed, and they understand the problems that our country is facing. That's why many of them have volunteered to be here. And -- but I can feel this underneath -- very concerned about the future of our country. We have to let them know that they're carrying on the tradition that we started 60 years ago.

Oh, by the way, what we did 60 years ago is exactly carrying on the traditions of our fathers and grandfathers, because we sat on the shoulders of many other men and women who brought us to the stage where we were able to do the things we did. And these people now are standing on our shoulders. And we appreciate that, understandably.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Chuck, we're going to go back and forth between Staff Sergeant Weckerlein and yourself. And we're expecting Beth Wilson to join us momentarily. If not, we'll -- we can follow up with her after the call. So Staff Sergeant, if you want to go next.

Q Thanks.

Q Great. Thank you. Hi, yes, my name is Staff Sergeant Julie Weckerlein. I'm from the -- (clears throat) -- Air Force Public Affairs Agency -- excuse me -- and I had spent some time over there in the Middle East as well. So I hope the weather's cooperating with you and that you're getting a lot of sun.

My question for you is, what has been the most surprising thing you've seen over there? Maybe some expectations that you had that sort of were exceeded. I know this isn't the first time members of the Tuskegee Airmen have visited with troops deployed, but during this particular trip, what has -- what have you seen that has left the biggest impression?

COL. JEFFERSON: Higgs, what about you?

MAJOR HIGGS: The thing that has been most impressive to me is just to see how bright the troops are. I mean, they're just -- they're just incredibly bright and they are engaged in things that are light-years from just 10 years ago or 15 years ago, when you were in a deployed environment. Now you have the capacity to communicate around the world. Troops are following this journey on Facebook, Tuskegee Airmen; we have the (tag word ?). The troops are to engage with this -- (inaudible) -- on Twitter. We've got the capacity now to communicate by way of satellite around the world in real time. That, to me, has been most amazing.

But then you also look at the vast array of missions that'll be accomplished and the tremendous dedication of the people that are away from their families, that are doing their jobs without complaint and without hesitation, and that speaks volumes about the incredible professionalism and the unwavering commitment of people who are volunteering to be here without being pushed to be here. People are all -- everyone who's here is a volunteer.

COL. JEFFERSON: Volunteers. Some three and four times.

MAJOR HIGGS: (Off mike) -- people that are doing this, every one of them. And I mean that inclusively. It really speaks volumes about the commitment that people have to the things we believe in and the things we hold dear.

COL. JEFFERSON: I'm taken back by the technology of the young people, the technological expertise, the different fields that these young people are in. It's mind-boggling. I suspect I -- all I can do is get in my e-mail. And these young people are transmitting -- taking care of radios and research, IFR, radar, and they're talking about these things as if to say -- these are the new technologies of the world, accomplishing their mission.

MAJOR HIGGS: I'll just add a bit that even the execution of this phone call is done in a way that --

COL. JEFFERSON: Yes.

MAJOR HIGGS: -- we always talked about doing things jointly. We're able to accomplish this call because of a mission that the Army is executing. And the Marines and the Navy are able to do things they're doing because of the things that the Army and the Air Force is doing. So the idea of the joint service, the total force -- (inaudible) -- is complete and full and in action here. And that's really impressive to see across the spectrum.

COL. JEFFERSON: Exactly.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go to Chuck.

Q Yes, sir. Colonel Jefferson, if you were to speak with a young black man or a young black women who were making life choices today, what would you say to them about military service and about what they would face in going into Iraq?

COL. JEFFERSON: Number one, military service is one of the greatest things that can ever happen. If you want to be really stingy about it, military service will prepare you for the rest of your life. It's the discipline under which you learn to succeed. It's an attitude toward life.

I often tell these young people, we live in a society that's relatively like a baseball game. Now, in a baseball game, you have certain rules. Three strikes, you're out, and so forth. But you don't come into a baseball game with football rules.

Young people, stay in school. Education is that stick in your hand to fight poverty and ignorance; education. Become involved with the educational process, to maintain dignity and discipline in your life.

Coming through the Tuskegee Airmen experience in World War II was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. It opened up vistas, opened up windows. It opened up doors to succeed in later life.

I tell young people, become involved -- (inaudible) -- church, society, homeownership, all of these things. Better the community and better America.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Staff Sergeant.

Q Yes, this is my last question.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to speak to an 8th-grade class. These are about 14-year-old students. And it dawned on me that they were in pre-school when 9/11 happened. And it was both surprising and not surprising that they were very unfamiliar with Iraq.

To them, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom are just sort of the headlines on the news. They haven't internalized it like those of us who were around for 9/11. What do you say to that? How can this generation, the people who are serving today -- how can we ensure that those coming up behind us understand the importance of what we're doing over there and how we shouldn't forget the lessons that we're learning? How have you taken your World War II experiences and continued that -- you know, that awareness?

COL. JEFFERSON: Let me back up. Number one, I believe that it's our fault, the older generation, that these young people have no idea of what's happening here in Iraq. They have not been educated. It is our responsibility to make sure that these young people are kept up to date.

The young people will not develop and research history themselves. They have to be led. Excuse me for saying it. You do not turn a person -- you do not turn a child loose, when he's 3, 4, 5 and 6, because they have -- but it's the responsibility of the older generation to educate them. They just won't get it by themselves, let's face it. They have to be taught.

MAJOR HIGGS: Right. I'll make a point about the young people that we've seen out here. And a lot of the airmen and soldiers and Marines, the sailors, that I've seen who are 18, 19, 20 years old, are a magnificent testament of our youth. We see and certainly have plenty of focus on the elements of youth that are -- (audio difficulties) --

Q Hello?

MAJOR HIGGS: Hello? Focusing on elements of youth that are not necessarily the best youth. But you certainly can have your confidence restored when you see the commitment of young people who are here, taking great direction from some of our brightest leaders who are out there. So I applaud the young people's efforts and commitment who are here.

COL. JEFFERSON: Yes.

MAJOR HIGGS: And I believe that they will be magnificent future leaders as a result of their experiences here.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. Okay, someone joined us at the very end. (Cross talk.)

Q Yes. This is Rick Fenders (ph) reconnecting.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, great. We'll send you a file after the call, if that's okay.

Q Thank you. Okay.

LT. CRAGG: Okay? Okay, Chuck, do you have any other questions?

Q Yes. Colonel Jefferson, what are your impressions of the young women that you see? Your -- obviously, during your service you didn't have the young women involved in the military like you do today. So what are your impressions of the women in our military?

COL. JEFFERSON: They're absolutely magnificent.

Now, we knew all the time that the intelligence and the qualifications of these young women were there. But at the same time, we knew that our experiences and qualifications to fill a certain job were there. They were not utilized because of the system of segregation, and women were treated the same way.

I remember that during World War II there were a group of women who flew airplanes and transported planes between different airfields. And these women were -- what were they? -- the WASP, W-A-S-P, Women's Auxiliary something something. But when they retired, they got -- they received no benefits, because the system in 1945 said that women were less than dirt. No benefits, no medical records, no medical aid.

But today, we recognize the capabilities of all of our women, and we award them and heap them with responsibilities. And the terrific jobs that they do, they accomplish, they're fantastic. Thoroughly integrated here in Iraq, thoroughly integrated with responsibilities.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: I know, Staff Sergeant, you said you had your last question before we had a break in the call, but do you have another one? If not, I'll turn it back over to Chuck, and then we'll have any closing thoughts from both gentlemen.

Q Oh, no. I'm good. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Chuck?

Q I just wanted to ask kind of a tourism question. Colonel Jefferson, what do you think of Iraq as a country? Have you had the chance to meet with any Iraqis?

COL. JEFFERSON: No. No, I've -- I have not had the opportunity to meet any of the indigenous people. Only with the understanding -- in fact, I received an e-mail about a couple of weeks ago showing the importance of Iraq, between the Tigris and the Euphrates River, and where Joseph was supposed to -- places in the Bible, talking about Chaldean -- the -- all these different places are here in Iraq. And I'm anxious to have an opportunity to get out and see some of the people and to visit some of the places. But to adjust --

Q Would you like to maybe -- COL. JEFFERSON: Adjust --

Q Would you like to maybe meet some of the Iraqi Air Force guys?

COL. JEFFERSON: Yes, indeed, I'd love to see them. I'd love to be in contact with them. But I hope that dust will allow me to do this. The dust storm won't come along.

Q Oh. Are you --

COL. JEFFERSON: By the way --

Q You're having dust storms now?

COL. JEFFERSON: No, the visibility's, what, a hundred yards? About a hundred yards, two hundred yards, so. We're basically out --

Q And when you served, you served in Italy, correct?

COL. JEFFERSON: That's correct.

We escorted --

Q So you had snow and rain.

COL. JEFFERSON: Yeah, the wintertime was snow, and the summertime was fantastic.

Yeah, we escorted the B-17s from Italy to Germany -- we flew top-cupboard -- Italy to -- (inaudible) -- and back. But the weather was fantastic.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

COL. JEFFERSON: Surely.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

With that, I'd like to turn it over to both gentlemen, Major Hicks and Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson, if you'd like to end with any closing thoughts.

MAJ. HICKS: My closing thought would be that this kind of forum is necessary and it's important. This kind of a trip is vital and it's important. This kind of experience is dutiful work but it's important. And I can't say enough about the experience. And I would do it in a heartbeat, as I'm sure any other person who's here would do the same.

COL. JEFFERSON: I'd say that I had the opportunity to participate -- I missed it -- last year or the year before. The other Tuskegee Airmen were here. And I've been looking toward this trip for two years.

It's a great opportunity to meet our young people and see how they're carrying on the traditions of our country, as I said before, the greatest country in the world.

It ain't perfect. By the way, a teacher ain't supposed to say ain't. (Laughter.) But it's the greatest country in the world. We still have some crazy kooks. But I find out, nobody's trying to leave; everybody's trying to get in. I pointed this out to a bunch of 8th graders the other day. They looked at me real funny, because the realization came. This is the best country in the world. That's why we are here and why we continue to serve and make it better. That's our game. That's our aim, to preserve our country.

MAJ. HICKS: Thank you, folks, very much.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen.

(Cross talk.)

This concludes today's roundtable. Thank you.

END.