



THREE COUNTRIES, SIX BASES, 27 DAYS: The Diary of a Hennessy Traveler

NRA Treasurer-elect Michael Gibbons (Mainstreet Ventures, Ann Arbor, Mich.) spent most of February on a Hennessy Travelers "tour of duty," evaluating foodservice facilities at U.S. Air Force bases worldwide for excellence. Gibbons was part of a four-person Hennessy team that evaluated bases with multiple foodservice outlets; his orientation began Jan. 29 in San Antonio and his tour brought him to three countries and six bases by Feb. 24. NRA board member Bill Baker (Baker Management, Hellertown, Pa.) served on a separate team that evaluated USAF bases with a single foodservice outlet.

Read on for Mike's take on the Hennessy travel experience.

January 29, 2007

Met for orientation and classroom training from 7:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. and then went to Randolph Air Force Base for lunch and a walk-through trial evaluation of their kitchen. Had dinner with the group at Republic of Texas joined by two colonels, one of whom is in charge of the division.

January 30, 2007

Second day: More orientation and briefing meetings. We broke off into our respective groups and discussed strategy for doing the evaluations. We each were given areas to focus on when we got started.

David Cortez hosted us for a fantastic night of Mexican food and mariachi entertainment. So far, this has been the highlight of the trip. His restaurant does 1.2 million meals each year and has more than 500 seats. He was a great host and we were joined by some friends of mine from Toledo (Milano's) who happened to be in town for medical treatments.

We start the first leg of our trip tomorrow. First flight is to Houston and then on to Gulfport Biloxi Airport which is near Keesler AFB, my home for the next three days.

January 31, 2007

Our team departed San Antonio this morning and after a short stop in Houston landed in

Biloxi, Mississippi. We were greeted by a group of a dozen people, banners and Mardi Gras beads! We were transported to Keesler AFB in a military bus. The base commander, Brigadier General Paul Capasso, gave us an overview of the base, which suffered \$950 million in damages from Katrina.

They played a video for us showing what had happened at the base and in the surrounding area. The military has spent more than 65,000 hours in voluntary service since the storm while still working their jobs on the base.

The base is located about 400 yards from the coast so getting here we saw where the casinos used to be. We saw signs for Outback, IHOP, Waffle House and many others — but the buildings were completely gone. The road has been rebuilt and not much more at this point. Two hundred thirty-eight people died and thousands were left homeless living in tents where their homes used to be. Most are now in trailers fighting with insurance companies so they can get the money to rebuild. When they get the money the challenge becomes the labor force and paying a 40 percent premium if you can find someone to do the work!

We are being housed in an on-base hotel in luxurious suites with two bedrooms, a kitchen, etc. It is truly first class. The food service took us to dinner at one of the inland

casinos and since it is one of the few options left it was packed.

The base health club is across the street and I had time to work out before dinner. It is a very nice facility and really busy. The military has new regulations and everyone gets tested for fitness quarterly.

They are at work trying to change the culture to curtail the history of "hard drinking" that is so often depicted. The base paper does articles on DUI this year vs. last, etc. Master Sergeant Gina Tremmel is a member of our team and she told us about the training everyone has been receiving in that regard. She believes it has been very effective, to the point that there is now a stigma attached to over-drinking by airmen.

We start our first evaluation tomorrow at 0 dark hundred — 6 a.m. It will be a long day with briefings between evaluating breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight meals.

February 1, 2007

The day started with a standing ovation by more than 100 servicemen, including Major General Mike Gould, commander of the 2nd Air Force; Brigadier General Paul Capasso, commander, 81st Training Wing; two more generals; colonels, and other brass. They gave us a briefing on the base and gave a compelling pitch for awarding the Hennessy to them and forgetting the rest of the trip!

We worked until 8 p.m. this evening evaluating the three facilities on the base. The Azalea and Magnolia each serve about 900 lunches each day and from 300 to 600 dinners. They seat about 400 each. The third facility, Live Oaks, is smaller but still serves 1,000 meals a day. There is a central prep kitchen for some shared efforts and a pastry kitchen that works for all three dining rooms.

While we are very critical in the grading process I can tell you that the "dirtiest" of these kitchens outshines any of mine by a mile!

We go out again at 10:30 to evaluate the midnight meal prep and service. At 6 a.m. we evaluate breakfast and then spend the day scoring. We must have finalized our rating before we leave the base on Saturday. We also select four or five employees to be recognized for excellence at the out briefing. I will get to address the group on behalf of the NRA.

February 2, 2007

Got an early start today and evaluated breakfast at Live Oaks dining hall after two hours sleep. We spent several hours reviewing training programs, safety logs, budgets, forecasts, contracts, etc. We then had lunch at Magnolia. We pay full price for all of our meals. To give you an example my lunch was:

- Coffee: \$.15
- Iced tea: \$.25
- Salad bar: \$.40
- Mashed potatoes: \$.10
- Hot roll: \$.10
- Stuffed pepper: \$.65
- Total: \$2.20 (no tax)

After lunch we spent a couple of hours developing the performance grade for the base. We use a 1,000-point evaluation form that I think some of you will become familiar with next month!

At 3 p.m. we gave awards to some exceptional performers and then got an opportunity to speak to the crew. I told them about a comment card that I had read that had been filled out by a new airman on Thanksgiving, his first Thanksgiving away from home. He commented on how friendly the staff had been and that he felt almost at home. I thanked them for taking such good care of our military especially the young ones who had never been away from home before.

We had dinner tonight with the brass at a local restaurant. Tomorrow we meet for breakfast at 7 a.m. and then head for the airport and go Biloxi to Dallas, Dallas to Chicago, and Chicago to London for a 6:50 a.m. arrival. Upon our arrival in London we will have traveled 7,089 miles or just less than one-quarter of the total trip.

We get to tour London for about three

hours and then head to Mildenhall AFB, about 45 miles from London. They have some serious aircraft there and a flight simulator that I am told I'll get to test. I'll let you know how I do.

February 3, 2007

After our 7 a.m. breakfast with the general we were taken to the Gulfport Biloxi Airport for the first leg of our trip. We flew to Dallas where our flight to Chicago was delayed due to a back-up at O'Hare because of high winds. We arrived 45 minutes late and I ran to the gate for our London flight and although the plane was still there we were not allowed to board because they had closed the door. Of course the plane sat there for another 30 minutes before it taxied away.

We were bumped to the next flight which was scheduled for 8 p.m. It was late boarding but we were on by 8:20 and they determined that they had a computer problem. We didn't depart until 10 p.m. and it was interesting to see people still boarding at 9:45!

We arrived in London Heathrow airspace at 11:15 a.m. on February 4 but the airport was fogged in so we circled for 40 minutes prior to landing. Of course at that point there was another plane at the gate so we had to wait for 30 minutes on the ramp. This day has been what the military refers to as a SNAFU.

February 4, 2007

We were greeted at the airport by a welcome team who drove us to Mildenhall AFB. It was a beautiful two-hour drive through centuries-old farming country. The base was used by USAF in WW II. It is a beautiful old base which looks more like William and Mary College than a military installation.

They had a welcoming party where we met the base command team and all the food-service team. The party ended early so that we could get back to our rooms and get some rest.

February 5, 2007

The base was very quiet this morning because they suspended morning operations so everyone could watch the Super Bowl, which started at midnight here. I watched the second half. By this time I didn't know what day it was, much less what time it was! We started our inspections today at 6 a.m. I got to take a break at 11 a.m. to spend time with Acting Ops Commander Colonel Slim Morgan to tour the base and get an up-close look at a C135 which is a refueling plane that carries 200,000 pounds of gas to refuel jets all over Europe, Iraq, etc. I was not able to take pictures for security reasons but I got to lie down in the back of the plane from where the refueling boom is operated, not a job I

would like! The boom operator lays face down looking out two little windows

and controls the refueling boom which actually is a wing and is steered just like the plane. The airman may be in that position for up to seven hours refueling aircraft. It is always freezing cold in the plane because the fuel is stored in the wings and below the main deck.

I walked away feeling like this might be the most important base in this part of the world. If it was lost, our Air Force would be virtually grounded. The base is at about half-capacity with many of its numbers deployed. (That means they are in Iraq).

The rest of the afternoon was spent evaluating Gateway, the primary dining hall. We finished up around 6 p.m. and Master Sergeant Recipe (no, I am not kidding about the name) invited me to play racquetball, first time in 20 years, I know I'll be hurting in the a.m. They have a great gym with cardio, basketball, racquetball, nautilus, free weights, spinning, etc.

We regroup at 10 p.m. to evaluate the midnight prep and meal at their other dining hall.

The Services Division is comprised of dining, Inn Management, fitness and mortuary! you figure it out. This applies to all bases worldwide.

February 6, 2007

We departed our quarters at 6 a.m. to begin our evaluation of the Backstand Dining Hall and Flight Kitchen. Believe it or not, it is fashioned after a '50s diner, including a jukebox.

We spent the morning there and at one point they got buried making carry-out meals for the flight teams so we pitched in and put together about 30 box lunches in five minutes so there were no delays.

We returned to the Main Hall to complete our evaluation and watch the lunch operation. After a short break we returned to meet with the foodservice team to do individual performance awards.

They hosted us at dinner tonight in the town of Mildenhall at the Wild Boar Inn where I feasted on Steak and Ale pie. About 30 of the airmen and NCOs joined us and showed great hospitality.

We leave the base at 6 a.m. for a 12:15 flight from Heathrow to Chicago and then on to Salt Lake City and Hill AFB. Don't know what time we get in; really don't know what time it is anywhere at this point because Jay Leno is on several times a day. If Cher dropped a bomb on herself would that be considered a plastic explosive?

I can hear the big jets departing on a mission and even though they are not fighters they may very well be in harm's way. It puts everything in a new perspective once you

start meeting the people on the base and putting faces to what they do! They look so young, including the officers.

I sat next to Airman Ivey at dinner; she can't be 20 years old. She is from Eastman, Georgia, and had never seen snow or been more than 50 miles from home until she joined the Air Force. Now she's based in London and hopes to advance in her career and get a college degree. I hope it works out for her.

February 7, 2007

We were picked up this morning at 6 a.m. and arrived at Heathrow at about 9:45. Lots of traffic around London; it took almost twice as long to get back as it did to get to the base.

The flight will land early 30 minutes early in Chicago. It was a perfectly clear day leaving England. We could see Scotland and Ireland and I was able to pick out a golf course or two. We leave Chicago at around 5 p.m. for Salt Lake City and Hill AFB. I think we are scheduled to arrive around 8PM their time. If my calculations are correct we will have been traveling for 21 hours today and almost all of it in daylight.

We got out of London just in time. They are predicting 4 inches to 6 inches of snow tomorrow which I guess is unheard of in those parts.

I don't think I've talked about my inspection team. Our leader is George Miller, Chief of the Air Force Food Service Branch which means he runs the whole show. He is a retired Chief Master Sergeant which is the highest NCO rank. Needless to say he knows his stuff and is responsible for program development in areas of recipe, cost controls, sanitation, etc. I think I lucked out getting on his team. He really understands what is happening on the bases and which bases are really operating at optimum efficiency.

The second member is Master Sergeant Gina Tremmel. She has been in for 19 years and has worked pretty much all over the world. It is standard practice to be transferred every three years or less. She has been on the other end of the Hennessy program a couple of times when the bases she was stationed at were inspected and I think that has really made her valuable as a team member. Her husband is also military. They met while stationed in Guam and have spent their entire married life in the service. They have generally served at the same bases except when one or the other has been deployed.

The other team member is Art Ritt, who seems to do this for a living. This is his second time as a Hennessy Traveler but he has also done a similar thing for the Army, Marines and Navy. Art spent many years as an executive chef and then formed a place-

ment company that placed foodservice executives. He represents IFSEA, the International Food Service Executives Association. Art's previous experience has been very helpful in getting me oriented.

February 8, 2007

We arrived last night around 10 p.m. Mountain time, 23 hours after we left Mildenhall. We were received royally by the Vice Wing Commander and Major Richard Roberts, the Services Director at Hill AFB, with their entourage. Fortunately, they took us to our quarters because we were all in need of some sleep.

We were picked up this morning at 6:45 a.m. to go to breakfast, followed by the in brief at the officers' club. There were about 100 people there including a two-star general and several colonels. The purpose is to tell us about the base and sell us on the quality of the foodservice division on the base. They show us a video and generally have a theme. This bases theme is "Mission Possible."

Following the in brief we left for Oasis Dining Facility, located at the Bomb and Missiles Training Range about 105 miles west of Hill AFB. If I understood correctly this is the one of very few sites in the U.S. where bombs and missiles are tested. I know tonight they are out practicing refueling F 16's over the dessert. After evaluating Oasis we headed back to the base to begin our evaluation at Fast Eddie's Flight Kitchen, located adjacent to the maintenance hangers. We got an up-close look at an F 16 that had done two tours in Iraq and was scheduled to be redeployed next week. It was fully armed with machine guns and heat-seeking missiles. It looked like something you wouldn't want to face off with in battle.

At 10:30 last night we went back to Fast Eddie's to observe the prep and service of the midnight meal. We got back to our rooms at a little after midnight.

Happy 80th Mom!

February 9, 2007

We left at 6:15 a.m. to start our evaluation at the main facility, Hillcrest. We watched as they prepped and served a busy breakfast. I have to say the food is excellent here. They have a great breakfast cook who is able to handle up to 200 people by herself for eggs, omelets, pancakes and French toast — all cooked to order without a glitch.

We followed up with evaluating their lunch program and then sat down to formalize our observations and score the base.

They have a phenomenal fitness facility with a 40-foot climbing wall, two full basketball courts, racquetball, spinning, running tracks indoors and outdoors, cardio equipment, a yoga room, weight room, Olympic-

size swimming pool and a Starbucks! I managed a little time to get over there this afternoon.

I have failed to mention that each facility has a POW/MIA table in the dining room. The table is set and symbolic as follows:

- Table — Symbolic of one prisoner alone against his oppressors.
- White cloth — Purity of their intention to respond to their country's call to arms
- One red rose — The life of each of the missing
- Yellow ribbon — Everlasting hope for a joyous reunion
- Full setting with a slice of lemon — For their bitter fate
- A pinch of salt — For the tears of the families
- Inverted wine glass — Because they aren't with us to toast
- Candle — For our commitment to ensure their return
- Chair leaning on the table — Representing no specific soldier but all those not with us
- Both American and POW Flags.

We pack up tonight and great ready to depart at 6 a.m. for Los Angeles and then on to Seoul, South Korea. We leave L.A. at 11:20 a.m. on February 10 and arrive in Korea at 5:20 p.m. on February 11. Sounds like fun!

At our out brief today we handed out outstanding performance rewards for extraordinary individual effort we ended up giving two team awards—one to the entire kitchen at the Oasis for terrific teamwork, and one to the bakery at Hillcrest, a mother-daughter team along with a few other individuals.

We were told that the elderly Vietnamese women (I can't remember her name) who works in the dish room was recognized as the employee of the year. Part of that recognition was a \$200 cash reward. She split it with everyone else on her shift. Talk about teamwork! Think of what that \$200 represented to her!

February 10 to February 11, 2007

We departed Hill AFB at 5:30 a.m. February 10 and flew from Salt Lake to Los Angeles and then left Los Angeles at 11:30 a.m. for Incheon International Airport which is outside of Seoul, Republic of Korea. We arrived here at 5:30 p.m. on February 11. Somewhere over the Pacific we crossed the International Time Line and into tomorrow. Our total time of actual travel time from base to base was 23 hours.

We were given a heroes' welcome as we exited customs. The welcome was led by Commander Major Todd Alcott who heads up the 51st Services Squadron. The entire leadership of the squadron met us and the airport and rode with us by bus to their base,

about a two-hour ride. During our travel to the base they showed us a video on the history of the Korean War and the ongoing conflict. When we entered the base we were given a police and fire-truck escort to the hotel with lights and sirens going.

I want to comment on the flight. It was arduous but the cleanliness and service on the plane was fantastic. I had never seen the crews clean restrooms during the flight but they did this every 30 minutes! The airport is impeccably clean and well organized. Our luggage got to the claim-check area at the same time we did.

We have the day off today so we are heading into Seoul for some sightseeing and shopping. I am told you can get a custom-made suit for \$200 so if you see me sporting some new threads you'll know the deal.

I just got back from town. Sue Burke, the queen of shopping for Main Street Ventures, will be proud of me. I am having four suits and one sport coat custom-made — all 100 percent wool — for under \$900 including tax and shipping. I love this place!

We were able to watch a U 2 take off this morning. That is the same spy plane that was shot down by Russia about 20 years ago. It has wheels to support the wings for takeoff; these drop as soon as the wings develop lift. A car chases the plane down the runway and picks up the wheels. The plane goes almost straight up like a rocket and circles over the base until it reaches an altitude that the North Koreans missiles can't get to — about 50,000 feet. It can fly at up to 100,000 feet.

The base has more security than I have seen at other bases. Triple fencing around the airport, heavily armed gates and Humvees with machine guns stationed near every entrance. It is easy to know which way is north; just look to see which way the Minute Man missiles are pointed.

We are going to a Korean restaurant with the entire food services division tonight, except for those that have to work. Many of the base commanders are attending as well.

February 13, 2007

Back to work today, beginning with evaluating breakfast at the Ginko Tree dining facility at 6 a.m. This is a big place, actually built to feed the whole base. They serve more than 2,000 meals per day — 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. Breakfast is typically 400 to 600 meals; lunch, 700 to 1,000; dinner, 600 to 900; and then 300 to 500 midnight meals. It picks up before paydays and slows for a couple of days after payday while the people spend their pay in town.

Following the breakfast meal we were taken to the officers' club for social time with the base leadership and given our in brief on the base. This was a particularly professional

presentation with video. The general spoke, along with two of the more senior airmen.

We then returned to Ginko to begin our in-depth evaluation. We observed lunch prep, lunch production and cleanup and then left for Pacific House, which is over 50 years old and looks it. That doesn't mean it isn't clean, just old. We observed while they prepared for the dinner meal.

At 3 p.m. we went to the foodservice office to review their accounting, five-year and contingency plans. The contingency plans were secret so only Mr. Miller and Master Sergeant Tremmel were allowed to see them due to their clearances. It is easy to forget that this is a war zone except for seeing all the weapons in the dining halls and the armed Humvees around the base.

We got a break from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. My plan was to work out and watch the foodservice basketball team play their intramural game but I don't remember anything after 6:01 p.m. until I woke at 9:45. I think jet lag hit us all and everyone grabbed a long nap!

We left for Ginko and the midnight meal at 10 p.m. and got back about 1 a.m. I'm in the lobby now — 6 a.m., and we leave shortly to view the Back House, their flight-line facility.

Let me be the first to wish everyone a Happy Valentine's Day, which it is here but not there for another nine hours!

February 14, 2007

Happy Birthday Olivia! No. 1 grand-daughter turns six today.

We left at 6 a.m. to observe the breakfast shift at Pacific House, which I think they should rename the Four Seasons. Depending on where you are in the building it can be too hot, too cold, rain — or on a really cold day. snow. In other words, the building really needs help. We arrived at 6:10 and the crew was hard at work since breakfast begins at 5:30 a.m.

After breakfast we went to the Back Hanger which is a tiny 60-seat facility that is literally part of one of the hangers. We got to see an F 16 and an A 10 Warthog being overhauled. The Back Hanger is another old facility with little heat and worn-out equipment but somehow they manage to serve hundreds of meals a day to the airmen working maintenance. Another facility that is old, tired and rundown, but still very clean.

After observing lunch we met to grade the base and select the outstanding performers. Our out brief and award ceremony was at 3:30 this afternoon. Chief Miller had gone out and bought roses for all the female airmen in attendance and passed them out before the meeting. There were lots of teary eyes.

A young airman from New Jersey won the HTA award. This gets her a trip to the Hennessy event in Chicago this May. We select one person at each base and then the

individual winner is announced in Chicago. It caught her by surprise; needless to say she was ecstatic.

We are off to the DMZ at 6 a.m.

February 16, 2007

The longest day of my life — thirty-nine hours! We began at 6 a.m. in Korea, leaving for the Incheon Airport. We arrived at about 9 a.m. and had time for a leisurely breakfast before starting our journey.

We couldn't help but notice that the airport was spotless. The security people were extremely efficient and courteous. When you passed through the X-ray they gave you slippers to wear so that you wouldn't be walking barefoot. There was virtually no wait because they had so many lanes open.

The plane was the same. Operated by Korean Air, they gave great service with very courteous flight attendants. The restrooms were cleaned floor to ceiling every 30 minutes. We arrived in Chicago about 13 hours later, at about 9 a.m. the same day we left. No need to describe the condition of O'Hare airport or the treatment we received from the TSA personnel. Suffice it to say that it was very un-Korean if not un-American.

From Chicago we traveled to Denver and then on to Spokane, Washington, where we were greeted at the airport by a very animated welcoming committee led by Col. Van Fuller and Major Gina Humble and escorted to the base where we were given a police escort to our quarters. As we arrived, we drove under an arch of water served up by two of the base fire trucks. Although they had plans for dinner with us, we had other ideas — and after a quiet dinner at the Buckhorn restaurant we hit the sack.

February 17 to February 18, 2007

We had gotten to Spokane on Presidents Day weekend so things were quiet at the base and we had a couple of days to relax. We spent some time touring Spokane and the base on Saturday and then met up with the Food Services crew for dinner at a nearby casino.

On Sunday, George, Art and I drove to the Coeur D'Alene Resort in nearby Idaho for brunch while Master Sergeant Tremmel went skiing with a group of airmen. Art knew the food-and-beverage director so not only did we get our fantastic brunch for free (how does crème brulee French toast sound?), we got a tour of the entire resort. The owner's suite is 2,400 square feet and comes equipped with a butler and a chef for a mere \$6,000 a night. They took us through their beautiful new spa, through all the kitchens and the bakery. Nice place!!

We had eaten enough at brunch to take care of us for the rest of the day so that when

we got back we did a little work, got organized and prepared to get back to work in the morning.

February 19, 2007

We departed at 6 a.m. for the Warrior Inn where we given a brief tour by Senior Master Sergeant Walker. We met and had breakfast with their dining facility leadership at 8:30 a.m. We spent lunch and dinner at the Warrior doing our evaluation, took a break from 7 p.m. until 10:30 p.m. and returned to evaluate the midnight meal.

Each base had a specific theme for Hennessy and this base had HEART. They explained during the in-brief: H (Happy), E (Enthusiastic), A (Attitude), R (Readiness), T (Teamwork). Their slogan was "Pride, Integrity and Enthusiasm is the HEART of our organization." This was a group that really walked the talk.

The second facility was the Ross, located on the far side of the airstrip. During our drive out there George pointed out bunkers where they had at one time stored nuclear weapons. The base has a survival training school and it seemed that most of the people fed at the Ross were taking those classes.

I think the idea was that they put these airmen through rigorous training then dropped them off in the mountains and told them to find their way home — no hitchhiking allowed.

February 20, 2007

After our day at the Ross they had a reception at the Warrior where they split us up into groups and asked questions. The first team to run up front and ring the bell got to give the answer. I thought for a while that Purple Hearts would be awarded after the event!

This was followed by our out brief and awards presentation. Later we had dinner with the foodservice leaders at a restaurant in Spokane. I had an opportunity to visit with Senior Master Sergeant Walker and talk about his experiences in the Middle East. He has deployed twice and is going again this summer. He does this because he believes it sets a good example for the younger airmen. He was at a base in Kirkuk that was an ammo dump for all the confiscated munitions. A mortar was lobbed in and happened to hit the pile. It was igniting for four hours while everyone took cover. Fortunately, no one was injured.

February 21, 2007

We departed Spokane for Boise, Idaho, and Mountain Home AFB. It's funny how each time we are pulling away from a base I hope that they win. Each place has so many dedicated people trying so hard to be the best and even though you only get to know a few of

them you can't help but root for them.

We got another terrific welcome upon our arrival at Boise. The base is about 45 miles from the airport near the city of Mountain Home, population 3,000. This place is nowhere but you can see snow-covered mountains in all directions and the sun always shines so it is beautiful.

They held an ice-breaker reception for us at the officers' club that evening that was attended by just about every one in the food-services division.

Since the base is so remote they have really done a great job at taking advantage of outdoor activities and making them available to everyone on the base. They had a great fitness and sports center that included a wellness center for smoke cessation, diet programs and more. The base has a 6,700-yard championship golf course (the answer is no, I didn't play), skeet range, paintball (I invited Art but he wouldn't go), a nearby marina with inexpensive boat rentals, snow mobile rentals and even camper rentals.

February 22, 2007

We started our morning at 6 a.m. and headed for the Wagon Wheel Dining Hall for evaluation of breakfast and then attended an in brief at headquarters at 8 a.m. Mountain Home has been used for F-16 fighter training and is now used to train on F-15s.

During our visit we got a photo op with each of us sitting in an F-15. They made us empty our pockets and covered all the instruments while we were in the jets. We got a little lesson in the bunker buster and precision bombing. More and smaller bombs (250 lbs.) are being made. Coupling these with GPS guidance, they don't miss and avoid collateral damage. If only our enemies were so considerate!

We did our typical day of inspection and as it slowed the first afternoon we got to take a look at Trail Winds Café the flight kitchen. Trail Winds is all carry-out and used primarily by the maintenance crews.

That evening we were given chance to see the helmets that the pilots wear. The cost is \$100,000 per. We got to try on the night vision goggles which was a very interesting experience.

Later we were taken out onto the field where 5 F-15s were being sent out as Chinese jets and two more as our jets for a dogfight over the desert. The major said the battles were almost always won by the unrestricted American fighters. The jets took off while we watched from less than 100 yards away! Incredible! We had a radio with us so we could hear them talking and the first jet was at 6,500 feet in 45 seconds. They go from zero to 350 miles an hour in less than a mile. These jets cost \$12,000 an hour to operate so there is no such thing as a joy ride but

you can tell every ride gives the pilots joy!

Like all the other bases this one had remarkably clean kitchens, filled with conscientious airmen and NCO leadership doing a great job.

I met a TSgt from Grand Rapids. She had read my bio and made a point of meeting me and letting me know that her family would be visiting the Chop House! I spent some time prepping pepper steak with Senior Airman Emmanuel Santillan who is from La Romana, Dominican Republic.

He told me that his most memorable experience was deploying to Qatar in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. While there, he trained new airmen with the AL Udeid Honor Guard, formed the base's drill team and performed for the entire base. On top of that he makes a pretty good pepper steak!

I don't know why it was most noticeable on this base but all bases did it: Revelry at 6 a.m.; the national anthem at 5 p.m., and taps at 10 p.m. Each day when the anthem played the base stopped. Everyone stopped what they were doing. If you were driving on the base you stopped until the music ended.

February 23, 2007

We started at 6:30 a.m. at the flight kitchen for breakfast evaluation and then back to the hotel for grading before the awards banquet where the base commander accused me of recruiting — who wouldn't?

Our last night was spent at a winery about 30 miles from the base where we had a nice dinner with the Services Division leadership. They asked me what I would take home from our trip. Without hesitation my first thought was that I am more proud than ever to be an American.

I think the next thing that came to mind was the valuable service that our military provides beyond security. So many of the young men and women I met did not have a chance to attend college. Maybe some didn't come from the greatest of family situations; some may have had little chance at succeeding at anything because they lacked direction and discipline but because of the military they have an opportunity to get an education. They also have an opportunity to gain experience that translates into real jobs when they get out and they have an opportunity to mature and understand what it means to be part of a team.

I think when I headed for San Antonio I thought I had a lot to offer. I know now that I worked hard and gave a lot — but got so much more in return.

Thanks to those I traveled with — George, Art and Gina — and to those who made it possible for me to travel — Jon Gould, Sue Burke, Tim Kirby, Brian Johnson, Dorothy and Chef Simon.