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Area woman on duty in Gulf

BY GRACE DOVE, Wyoming County Press Examiner

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PERSIAN GULF - It's a much different world from Tunkhannock, and a long way from Alaska.

Capt. Noreen Kern, a Tunkhannock Area High School graduate, is serving as a combat stress specialist assigned to the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing in the Persian Gulf.

For security reasons the name and location of her base can't be released, said Air Force public information officer Capt. Tom Crosson.

Kern is normally assigned to Elmendorf Air Force Base near Anchorage, Alaska.

She is the daughter of William and Kay Kern of Tunkhannock. She received a bachelor's degree in 1995 from Bloomsburg University and master's degrees in social work in 1999 and in public administration in 2001 from Marywood University.

Her sister, Marlene Aitken, teaches at Mehoopany Elementary School, while her brother, William Kern Jr., a 2000 Tunkhannock Area graduate, is headed to Brown University. Another sister, Cathy Rombola, lives in New Jersey.

Kern joined the Air Force after 9/11. "I wanted the opportunity to serve my country and to do a little bit of traveling," she said in a recent telephone interview. "And I certainly have traveled."

While at Elmendorf, she served as the director of family advocacy. She has been in the Middle East for about three weeks, teaching newly arrived troops how to recognize, prevent and deal with combat stress. She also trains leadership on the signs of combat stress in troops.

"It's a wide range, from separation anxiety to losing a comrade," she said.

Combat stress, said Kern, is normal and can be caused by changes in work or living

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conditions, long days with inadequate rest, concerns at home, difficulty adjusting to a new assignment or unit, direct involvement in combat or the accidental deaths of buddies.

She also offers counseling and suggestions for relaxation techniques. "Sometimes folks just need a time out," she said. Her suggestions include staying connected to loved ones, developing new friendships, settling into a routine and staying in good physical shape by exercising, getting enough sleep and drinking enough water.

"Exercise is a big thing out here," she said, describing the base's facilities and programs in everything from self-defense to weight training.

She also encourages personnel to become involved in morale-boosting unit and base activities, such as occasional cultural trips to a nearby town or Army base.

"It's not a resort out here," she added. "It's a far cry from home."

On May 31 she made a "Gatorade run" with the wing chaplain to the flight line, where mechanics maintain the C-130 planes, in 111-degree heat, normal weather for the area. The pair passed out drinks and snacks, and gave pep talks to the crews.

"I felt like I was on the ice cream truck," she said, chuckling.

Often the troops are too busy or don't want to take the time to visit the clinic or meet with the chaplains, said Kern. So she goes to them, and plans to visit all the troops on the base.

"I want to make sure they're not feeling forgotten. They like to see that somebody cares."

Kern said she's grateful for all the community support that she and the troops have received. She said she was also thrilled to have called Stony Mountain Garden & Floral on Mother's Day and have flowers delivered to her mother the same day.

Her enlistment ends in January 2008, but Kern is keeping her options open. She said she has enjoyed her work.

"The Air Force has been good to me - I've seen and done things that I never imagined I would," she said.

Kern said she appreciates the support from the people at home. "Thank you very much for all your love and support," she said. "I'll carry the message back to the troops."

386th AEW in a nutshell

According to Capt. Crosson, the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing provides airlift support for Operation Enduring Freedom and the Horn of Africa.

It is comprised of the 386th Expeditionary Maintenance, Mission Support, Medical and Operations Groups and the 586th Expeditionary Mission Support Group.

It is composed of more than 3,400 airmen from the National Guard, Air Force Reserve and active duty. More than 1,300 of the airmen serve with the 586th Expeditionary Mission Support Group, providing security at the largest theater internment facility in Iraq, security for convoys, and drivers for convoys.

The wing is also home to one of two aero-medical staging facilities (CASF) in the area, serving as a gateway for patients airlifted to Germany or the United States for further medical treatment.

Kern has developed a Web site for people at home who wish to help boost the troops' morale. Click on <http://AnySoldier.com/WhereToSend/DynamicAdmin.cfm?SEQNO=22529&popup=noon> the **AnySoldier.com** Web site for ways to help.

Or [click here for a direct link](#).

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