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V CORPS COMMANDER AWARDS PURPLE HEARTS, JOINS JONES, BELL IN DISCUSSING ISSUES WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

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SCHWEINFURT, Germany – Three of Europe's top American military leaders turned out to discuss current issues and concerns, and to award and thank V Corps Soldiers and family members a Family Readiness Group meeting at Conn Barracks here Aug. 24.



SPC KRISTOPHER JOSEPH
V Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez pins the Purple Heart on Spc. Kevin Terry and nine other Soldiers from the corps' 1st Infantry Division at Conn Barracks in Schweinfurt, Germany Aug. 24. Following the award ceremony Sanchez, Gen. James Jones, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe and the Commander of the United States European Command and U.S. Army Europe Commander Gen. B.B. Bell met with Family Readiness Group members to discuss issues and the FRG members' concerns.

Supreme Allied Commander Europe and commander of U.S. European Command, Gen. James Jones, was the main speaker at the event. He and United States Army Europe Commander Gen. B.B. Bell gave attendees a chance to ask questions about deployments, unit and family issues, and other topics.

V Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, just returned to his command in Europe following his year-plus tour in Iraq as the commanding general for Multi-National Force – Iraq (formerly Combined

Joint Task Force – 7), opened the meeting. Sanchez capped the opening by presenting the Purple Heart medal to 10 Soldiers from the corps' 1st Infantry Division wounded in action in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“Receiving this medal shows your willingness to live up to your oath,” Sanchez told the medal recipients. Sanchez then turned to the family members in the audience and added, “But the sacrifices you make are just as important, and the demands you face here are often greater than the battlefield.”

The full list of Soldiers awarded the Purple Heart in the ceremony includes: Lt. Col. Patrick M. Gawkins, Command Sgt. Maj. Jane H. Cunningham, Staff Sgt. Daniel L. Beaty, Staff Sgt. Edward Schmidt III, Staff Sgt. Aaron T. Whitty, Sgt. Matthew N. Skipper, Spc. Erik England, Spc. Kevin Terry, Pfc. Donovan Goff and Pfc. Mychol Robirds.

Purple Heart recipient Pfc. Donovan Goff of the 38th Personnel Services Battalion said he had no idea his corps commander would be on hand to present his Purple Heart. Even after sustaining injuries from an improvised explosive ordnance attack in Iraq, Goff was quick to say he wanted to return to Southwest Asia as soon as possible, because he missed the bond he developed with the people in his unit there.

Many of the concerns family members expressed during the session that followed revolved around recent announcements about rebasing and restructuring of the Army, and its effect on units, communities and families in Europe.

Vietnam veteran Jones spoke in detail about the changing climate in the military, the need for transformation and its implications on family readiness and stability. He assured the families that the Army will always have a permanent presence in Europe.

"There is no need to panic," he said in light of rumors of base closures and units departures.

Jones did admit that there will be changes in tour lengths and total force numbers in Europe, but he said support facilities such as schools, hospitals and post exchange facilities will be as available as they are now.

Jones said the military is looking to augment certain units to perform only six-month European tours, giving families more predictability and stability Army wide. "The future will have more stability for families," Jones said. "Whatever changes come down the road are so the military can be more strategically effective."

In an interview before the meeting, Sanchez affirmed that family support is a top priority in plans for whatever changes lie ahead. "The families are important, and we are going to take care of them," he said.

"It is vital that we connect with families in a powerful way so that when they discuss issues with their Soldiers and vice-versa, they'll have up-to-date information and they'll have confidence in their leadership," said Bell.

Bell, too, thanked family members for their constant support of their Soldiers. "We should pause and celebrate what we're doing," he said.

While she admitted that it was a bit unnerving to hear about changes ahead for the Army in Europe, FRG member Eliane Wentz said it was wonderful that these top leaders took the time to talk with families. "Their continued involvement shows how important the family is in the higher levels."

"Everyone's concerned about all the transformation talk, and today I got a lot a reassurance that we (family members) count and we matter, and that this issue is being handled with great concern," she said.

"Today I could really feel everyone of was one big family," added FRG member Katania Staples. "Just getting together like this so important to get through whatever is going on our lives."

"We are all in this together, and how we help each other through the difficult times is what matters," said Jones.

