

300 airmen return to Dyess

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Wednesday, July 29, 2009

Seconds after the door to the commercial airliner carrying 300 airmen from the 9th Bomb Squadron opened, the crowd of families and friends waiting at Dyess Air Force Base erupted into cheers.

American flags and posters waving in their hands, children lifted up on their toes to catch a glimpse of dads and moms returning home from a six-month deployment in southwest Asia.

"There he is," said Debra Myers, waving to her 21-year-old son Drew Anderson.

Following a steady stream of troops striding across the airstrip, Drew nodded to his mother, smiling.

"I'm totally excited," Myers said. "This is his first deployment, and I've only talked to him once while he's been gone."

For many the return marked a memorable occasion. Cameras flashed and balloons bounced happily on toddler's wrists as the troops hugged their loved ones for the first time in months.

Military wife Paulina Meza has spoken to her husband three to four times a week, using web cameras to keep in touch with him.

"I've dreamed about this moment," Meza said. "I told my friends if I passed out, please do CPR and wake me up real quick. I want to see him."

Most of the troops were away for six months and will stay home for a year before being deployed again, said Capt. Will Powell, public information officer.

"I'm excited to be back," said Capt. Frank Welton, holding his 2-year-old son who waved a small American flag. "I get to spend some time with Becky and Jake."

Welton's wife, Becky, stood by, her right hand resting on her stomach. She is seven months pregnant with a baby girl.

"It's been a little crazy these past six months ... having a two year old and expecting a baby," she said.

But Becky is not just another military wife. Based in San Antonio, Becky is also active duty U.S. Air Force.

"We've been lucky that we haven't been deployed at the same time," she said. "We've been apart our entire married life. He's based here, and I'm in San Antonio."

With new assignments coming next summer, the couple hopes to live together soon. To celebrate Welton's return and a belated birthday for Jake, the family is heading to Canyon Lake.

"This is one of the few times when a large amount of families and friends come out," Powell said. "It's a nice welcome home event."

Meza left for California when her husband — senior airman Stephen Meza — went on his first deployment in January. The couple have been married for three years.

"I kept myself as busy as I could," Meza said. "I worked. I got involved in church."

Four days ago, Meza moved into the couple's new house at the Dyess Air Force Base.

"He hasn't even seen it yet," Meza said. "I did all the decorating and got it all ready for us."

Meza said she and her husband will be taking a vacation before settling into their new house.

"I thank God that he protected him," she said. "I never would have picture myself here as a military wife, but I'm very proud of him. I know he has made a sacrifice."

Man to kayak Mississippi River

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Tuesday, July 28, 2009

Brian Righi's 17-foot bright red kayak glided noiselessly, circling the lake at Nelson Park on Tuesday afternoon. Logging in several hours of practice daily, the local author is preparing for a 2,500-mile trip down the Mississippi River.

Righi will depart Sunday from Lake Itasca, Minn., headed toward the Gulf of Mexico, documenting the expedition for a book.

“When I was really young I read ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ and it just kind of stuck with me,” he said.

Unlike Mark Twain’s title character Huck Finn, who shared the voyage with a slave named Jim, Righi will be making the trip alone.

“One of the reasons why I was so moved to do this was because the Mississippi is the most American river,” Righi said. “It cuts through the heart of everything and what better way to capture America than by meeting the people.”

The expedition could take up to two and a half months to complete. Righi said he will interview people as he heads south.

While Righi has experience mountain climbing and traveling, he only started kayaking six months ago when he pitched the book idea to his editor at Schiffer books.

The working title of the book is “At the Head of Many Waters: One Man’s Journey through the Heart of America.” Righi said he expects the book to be published by late 2010.

“The kind of book I want to write is more than a travel log, but very much like (Henry David) Thoreau and about connecting with nature and taking care of our environment. I’m shooting for more of a piece of literature than travel journal.”

In addition to his daily kayak loops at the Nelson Park lake, Righi has been working on his upper body strength to prepare himself for the 8-hour days of pushing through the third-longest river in North America.

“It’s important because I’ll be doing thousands and thousands of strokes,” he said. “I’m sealed into the cockpit. You have to use your whole body to work the kayak.”

Two spaces in the kayak will store Righi’s sleeping bags and food and water. He will also be equipped with journals, pens and a copy of Thoreau’s “Walden or, Life in the Woods,” a personal account of Walden’s stay at an isolated cabin. He will be camping at state parks and other areas along the way.

“People I know go back and forth between worry and excitement,” Righi said. “My wife is very supportive of my writing. The hardest part will be leaving her, but she knows this is one of my dreams.”

Righi and his wife, Angela, have been married since last June. The longest the couple have ever been apart is a single weekend.

“I feel very, very nervous,” Angela said. “It’s a long time to be away from someone. I know this is a really big opportunity for him, and I just think it’s wonderful.”

Angela said while her husband is away, she will be checking in with him regularly through cell phones.

“I’m going to be pretty strict in making him call me every night even if it’s just to say he’s still alive,” Angela said, laughing.

Shifting his weight carefully, Righi rocked the kayak in the calm waters at Nelson Park.

“This could tip over really easy,” he said. “I thought about using a canoe, but they’re slower and not as maneuverable.”

Aggressive cross-currents, hidden whirlpools and moving barges are Righi’s most threatening obstacles, but he said he is still thrilled to undertake the adventure.

“I’m definitely excited,” he said. “It’s really neat when you think about something from childhood and then you do it.”

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Abilene prisons: no air conditioners

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Monday, July 6, 2009

If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of prison.

Jason Clark, public information officer for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), said no prison units in Abilene and surrounding area are equipped with air conditioners.

Statewide only 19 of 112 state prisons are air-conditioned, with the cooled prisons generally reserved for sick and mentally-ill inmates, Clark said.

Texas summer temperatures typically push over 100 degrees, especially in July.

Clark said estimating the temperature in the prisons without air conditioning depended on several variables.

“It would vary from unit to unit,” he said. “During the summertime it does get quite warm and that’s why we take measures to make sure our staff and offenders are protected from the heat.”

About 155,000 inmates are in Texas prisons.

When temperatures top 90 degrees, prisons allow work crews to start earlier, take longer breaks and drink more water. Inmates are allowed to wear shorts in recreation rooms and the warden will monitor the temperature hourly and broadcast the information to the unit.

Officers are required to undergo “extensive training” in identifying and treating heat illnesses. Most also carry pocket cards with tips to prevent extreme heat exposure.

Additionally, units have tempered-air fans, “which are big fans that move the air throughout,” Clark said. The electric fans are placed in hallways, day rooms and dormitory units throughout the prison.

Offenders can also purchase personal fans for \$22. Last year nearly 15,000 fans were sold. Indigent prisoners have the opportunity to participate in a program that supplies them with a fan.

“The safety of our staff and offenders is paramount,” Clark said.

This year seven prison employees and nine inmates have suffered heat-related illnesses, with the closest occurring at the TDCJ’s Hobby Unit, located 200 miles southeast of Abilene in Gatesville. A correctional officer became overheated and was transported to hospital.

But Texas prisons will not be receiving any relief soon, as Clark said the cost of equipping facilities with air conditioning would be “substantial.”

Some Louisiana and Florida prisons also do not have air conditioning.

Heat cases only come to court when prison officials knowingly put prisoners in dangerous conditions, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas.

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So will Wayna take him back?

Friday, June 12, 2009

By Amanda Casanova

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Some men write romantic ballads or call out to a balcony to win a woman’s heart. Some send greeting cards, chocolates or flowers.

Others use the telephone — pole, that is.

“Wayna, I am sorry. Love, Clayton,” read the signs on Abilene telephone poles.

If Wayna hasn’t responded to the fliers, residents have. Signs have been placed under some of the originals, asking, “Clayton, what did you do?” and “Wayna, did you forgive Clayton?”

And the answer to Abilene’s mysterious street-side soap opera is ...

“It’s still up to her,” said Clayton White, 21, who is doing his best to get back in the good graces of Wayna Turnage. The couple dated for more than two years before breaking up about two months ago. White said his move to Waco to work at Golden Corral strained the couple’s relationship.

“Since I couldn’t be there in Abilene, I wanted to do something for her,” he said. “I just wanted to tell her I’m sorry, that I could have done things better. Wayna means a lot to me, and I miss her.”

After sending \$300 in flowers, White decided to try another avenue.

Thirteen hours, three rolls of duct tape and thousands of staples later, the fliers were posted on telephone poles throughout town.

“The whole time I was putting them up, people would stop and yell out, ‘You go, man,’ or ‘We’re praying for you,’” he said. “It kept my spirits up.”

Two hundred copies of the poster line various streets.

“If she was driving to work, she could see it,” White said. “And she’d be reminded that I love her.”

White said Turnage has seen the posters.

“She tried to be strong and say that was too much, but eventually she told me that it was pretty awesome,” White said.

Calls to Turnage were not returned.

Turnage’s MySpace page, which has not been updated in nearly three months, shows a slide show of snapshots of the couple.

“Love him,” a caption below a photo reads.

During the past month, the couple have been texting and calling each other, and White said he is hopeful.

"I think she could be the one," he said. "I don't want to be 35 years old and married and wondering if Wayna was the one that got away."

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Transmission line debates: wind here, towers somewhere else

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Saturday, July 18, 2009

Surrounded by rocky mesas and spinning wind turbines, Aleta Alexander points to the grassy area where 21,000 pounds of steel will tower before her childhood home tucked some 20 miles south of Merkel.

"It'll be some view," she said, shaking her head and considering the electrical transmission lines that are proposed to be constructed through her property.

The transmission lines would connect area wind farms with the state's electrical grid, joining two switching stations through Mulberry Canyon. Some residents of the canyon, such as Alexander, oppose the project. Others favor it.

The state says the lines are needed to carry electricity from wind farms where it is produced to metropolitan areas where it is needed. More energy can be generated by the roughly 4,000 wind turbines in West Central Texas than can be carried by existing transmission lines.

To remedy that, the state has approved nearly \$5 billion in new transmission lines.

The main concern of some Mulberry Canyon residents is the blow to the area's appearance with the construction of the roughly 125-foot towers, spaced between 1,000 and 1,200 feet apart, and the lines draped between them.

Karlen Hardy's home on Farm Road 126 is built with a panel of glass windows to give her the best view of the hills.

"During the daylight, I see the generators, and at night I see the red lights," Hardy said. "It looks like alien spaceships coming through the window."

"The lines will totally destroy our view," she added.

But Catherine Cuellar, Oncor spokeswoman, said the importance of the transmission lines outweighs the aesthetic worries.

"I definitely think that as time passes, the visual impact diminishes," she said. "Our lives depend on safe, reliable transmission. Anytime that construction occurs, initially, it's noticeable, but I do think that people will adjust to the lines as time passes."

Oncor is one of 13 entities designated to add 2,900 miles of transmission lines to the state's electrical grid. Of those 2,900 miles, 10 will run through Mulberry Canyon, depending on the route, and cost \$15 million.

"I'm extremely against it," Hardy said. "They need to go around. The historical area needs to be conserved, so we are working really hard to try to keep it the way it was."

Many unmarked graves of settlers are scattered throughout the canyon, plus there are Indian graves in the canyon's southeast region, residents point out. A proposed line would cut through the Indian grave site.

State law says that construction or improvement may not be made to an area where an unknown or abandoned cemetery is. The human remains must be removed under a written order issued by the state registrar.

Additionally, no person who is not the owner may excavate, damage, dig or destroy any American Indian campsite, burial or ruin.

Alexander's family history links to one of Mulberry Canyon's most notable pioneers, her great-grandfather Samuel Butman. Butman founded the Butman Methodist Camp & Retreat Center in the canyon, where Alexander volunteers once a week.

Butman's house still stands — a few hundred feet from a proposed transmission line.

But Steve Oatman, who lives in Sweetwater off State Highway 70, said he would welcome the lines.

"Put them in because we have wind turbines out at the ranch, and they curtail them," he said. "They have to shut them off once a week, and any kind of income we get off these wind turbines is a plus."

But his approval comes with a bit of negativity.

"The bottom line is this," he said. "They should have built all these transmission lines 15 years ago, and they've just been dragging their feet. And after the fact, they decided we need a great big one here. It's been sort of a half-hearted plan."

Oatman owns a “very small ranch” where wind turbines spot his land, and where two lines already run in front of his house.

“I’m all for green energy,” he said. “I’m not against it. I’m all for it. I want them to build them, but the problem is, now they put up thousands of wind turbines, and now they can’t get the electricity out.”

Alexander said residents have other concerns.

Across from the entrance from Butman Camp, the structures would become an eyesore for residents and parents alike, she said. Parents dropping off their children at camp might be turned away by the safety hazard posed by the towering lines.

“For the camp, kids will see those lines and say, ‘Hmm. How can I get to the top of that?’ Something like that is a liability for the camp,” Alexander said.

However, Cuellar said, the lines are protected under Homeland Security law and are equipped with “technology to deter anybody from being able to access them.”

Another concern raised is the effect of the magnetic fields.

However, a study released by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences showed that transmission lines emit fewer electromagnetic waves than microwaves or cell phones.

“Safety is Oncor’s top priority,” Cuellar said. “It’s part of Oncor’s corporate culture.”

Several open house meetings have been conducted by Oncor to help the company prepare a proposal to deliver to the Public Utility Commission, which will ultimately determine the route.

“We are including all of the feedback from the community into our proposal to the state,” Cuellar said. “The more feedback we get, the more well-informed our proposal will be.”

But some residents said the meetings, rather than help, pose interference with their opinions.

“It’s a very uneven approach to things, these meetings,” said George Quesada, who owns land in Mulberry Canyon.

“We’re spread out over several hours, and it’s come-and-go. I think the reason they do this is to prevent the neighbors from getting together to compare notes.”

The open house meetings are held in compliance with state law. Direct-mail notice is given to landowners within 500 feet of preliminary alternative routing for lines.

Cuellar said she could not yet estimate what compensation would be for right-of-way landowners.

Despite the idea of payment, Quesada has helped to spearhead an effort calling on Mulberry Canyon residents to write protest letters to Oncor.

Hardy sent 78 pages of documentation to Oncor in mid-May after feeling blind-sided with paperwork at a Sweetwater meeting.

“What was really frustrating is, when we got there, they hit us with questionnaires and all this other stuff,” she said. “No one was equipped with documentation because we weren’t prepared for that.”

Transmission line construction can take five to 10 years. A preferred and alternate route will be determined by the fall, Cuellar said.

Most residents are asking that the roughly 10-mile line be pushed west into Nolan County.

“The sooner they get it in, the better this country will be,” Oatman said. “I may have a big kV line, but at least we’ll get this electricity out of here.”