Ancient plays give voice to today’s veterans

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The Joint Stress Mitigation and Restoration Team (JSMART) at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, sponsored presentations of “Theater of War” on base beginning June 21 and ending June 24.

The program, presented by Theater of War Productions, included Hollywood and Broadway actors reading the Greek drama, “Prometheus In Prison,” as well as scenes from “Ajax” and “Philoctetes.”

“Theater of War” is an awareness project that has been touring military sites throughout the United States, Europe, and Cuba, performing ancient plays serving as a catalyst for town-hall discussions on issues that are hard to talk about otherwise,” said Bryan Doerries, ‘Theater of War’ producer. “The idea is to relate the impact of war on families and relationships, and provide a forum to discuss the effects of those experiences, utilizing these ancient plays that timelessly depict the seen and unseen wounds of battle.”

Among these Greek tragedies, ‘Prometheus In Prison’ was written by Greek general Sophocles 2,500 years ago for an audience of over 17,000 soldiers, said Doerries.

‘Prometheus In Prison’ portrays a depiction of a prisoner-of-war who has committed political crimes and is sentenced to an eternity of isolation and segregation away from the Gods and humanity.

“The play is about how this prisoner rebels against those who have incarcerated him, his family, and friends, and we use this as a forum relating to those who serve in the criminal justice field, and especially here at the detention camp,” said Doerries. “The story focuses on the pressures involved with working with self-righteous prisoners and the impact that has on those involved.”

The scenes read from ‘Philoctetes’ depict a psychologically complex tragedy about a Greek warrior marooned on a desert island while his troops wage war without him, showcasing the importance of teamwork and resiliency, added Doerries, while ‘Ajax’ tells the story of a Greek warrior dealing with depression near the end of the Trojan War, conveying the effects of suicide and the impact it has on families.

“The play gives a voice to depression and suicide so that people see that it’s not just them; these issues have been around since the beginning of time,” said Francesca Dietz, wife of a Soldier stationed with the 525th Military Police Battalion on Joint Task Force Guantanamo, who will sit on a panel of commentators for the “town hall” discussions.
The United States and the Philippines bonded in 1898 when the United States destroyed Spanish forces in Manila Bay, Philippines, helping the Philippines become independent of Spanish rule.

This same time, halfway around the world, U.S. Marines had gained control of 45 square miles of land in southeast Cuba, which later became an American Naval base.

111 years later, the two cultures merged once again on June 18 at the Downtown Lyceum on Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, as base residents watched song and dance performances traditional to Filipino culture. This event was intended to mark more than a century of Philippine independence, and it did—but it offered much more to attendees. Base residents took this celebration as an opportunity to see and understand the culture of the 1,125 Filipino contractors who work on NS Guantanamo Bay.

Base residents realized that, like American service members, Filipino contractors face long periods of separation from their loved ones to serve the U.S.

Jhoanne Saenz Santiago, a secretary for BREMCO who moonlights as an administrative clerk at the Bayview, left the Philippines for the opportunities at Guantanamo Bay when her son was two years old. Seven years later, her son now 9, Santiago selflessly says she is proud to provide good customer service to American service members and their families.

“You always have to think that every person deserves that good feeling, whatever their status,” said Santiago. “It feels really rewarding when I am able to help them or give them good service because they are so far from their families.”

Filipinos on NS Guantanamo Bay endure their own family separation because the Philippines is a third-world country, said Chief Navy Counselor Robert Pagtakhan, who was born in Manila, Philippines.

“The money they make working here allows them to support their families back in the Philippines,” said Pagtakhan, who joined the Navy in 1995 after emigrating to the U.S. with his mother. “It is in our nature to help people; we never turn anyone away.”

Pagtakhan said Filipino food is a crucial element to any party or celebration held by Filipinos.

“If you are invited to a party or dinner held by a Filipino, never eat before you get there because once you get there, you’re going to get fed,” said Pagtakhan. The kindness and friendship Filipino workers offer Americans on base is the signature of Filipino culture, which incorporates the food, dances and ideals of other cultures. The heritage of the Philippines can trace its roots to the Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and American cultures.

“Philippine culture is a melting pot of all cultures from around the world,” said Pagtakhan. “American culture is our greatest influence, but a great example of our cultural influence is our food: we get lumpia and pancit from China, empanadas from Spain, and our barbecue food from India.”

Celebrating Philippine independence on Guantanamo Bay was a unique experience for Pagtakhan, who will be involved in planning for next year’s celebration.
The current lead times have improved significantly and are approaching the NDFP goal of Sailors getting their orders four to six months prior to their rotation dates, said Lewellyn.

“We expect to meet our goal by the end of the year in most Sailors four to six months lead time, and Sailors moving to and from overseas assignments six months lead time. This level of funding moves us closer to calling the PCS policy change program (POCP) complete,” said Lewellyn.

POCP, outlined in NAVADMN 191/07 of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (DoD), affected the way PCS orders are funded. The services now must obligate all PCS costs when orders are issued, versus when orders are executed.

Chief of Navy Personnel, Thomas Bowers, said this policy change is the difference as between a credit card and a debit card. Once the orders are written if on a credit card, then the Navy would pay the bill once the service member executes their orders. If the orders are written as if on a debit card. Once the orders are released, the Navy is charged. “The policy changed three years ago, but now the focus is about reigning lead time,” said Bowers.

“The reason we’ve done so well this year, following the continuing resolution, is because we’ve brought ahead,” said Cmdr. Kendra Bowers, deputy director Navy distribution management. “Our current allocation of $667 million should fill all of our funding orders.”

Just a few months earlier a shortfall in PCS funding was felt Fleet-wide, which during the government shutdown, decreased lead time for Sailors receiving PCS orders. The average lead time between Sailors member executing the move and transferring two months or less.

PCF funding back on track

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Any day in GTMO

Members of the Chief Petty Officers’ mess assigned to Naval Hospital Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Joint Task Force Guantanamo’s Joint Medical Group, participate in the cake cutting ceremony with guest of honor, Command Master Chief Tammy Heap, the command master chief of II Marine Expeditionary Force in Camp Lejeune, N.C., during the Hospital Corps birthday ball held June 17 at the Windjammer.

Friends, co-workers remember retired Guantanamo firefighter

“‘If you were down or feeling sad, he always has a word of happiness to give you, he always has a bright smile’,” said Mario Alando Downie, a firefighter who worked with Sewell since 2007. “I never heard that man say anything bad about anyone or give anyone bad advice; he has always been an inspirational person.”

Downie said that knowing Sewell helped him stay motivated and ambitious.

“‘He made me want to be a captain and be a leader so that I can be an inspiration for other persons and young firefighters coming up,” Downie said. “He has propelled me to want to move forward to be a better person, a better husband, a better friend and a better worker.”

Abner Brown, who had known Sewell since 1994, said that his dedication to the fire department had no limits.

“‘No hours could stop him from helping you to get any test, any training, any outstanding work done,” said Brown. “He had so much and gave so much. To me, he [never] held back anything. He lived his life to the fullest.”

Residents of Naval Station (NS) Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, remembered a base employee during a memorial service June 19 at the United Jamaican Fellowship Church.

John Sewell, a retired NS Guantanamo Bay firefighter, died in Jamaica June 4 from cancer. He is survived by his wife, Ann Marie, and his daughter, Ruthann, who turned one-year-old June 23. He was 51.

Sewell began working at NS Guantanamo Bay in 1985 when he took a contractor position with Burns and Roe and a second job at McDonalds. In 1986, he became a firefighter, and was promoted to the rank of captain in 2009. Sewell retired in November of 2010 and returned to Jamaica.

During his eulogy, Carmen Wilson, Sewell’s friend, said he was an example of a person who used every opportunity to share his skill and talents with the NS Guantanamo Bay community.

For many of the firefighters who worked with Sewell, he was an admirable figure.

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