



The Washington Redskins (now Commanders) cheerleaders visit Afghanistan for the Super Bowl 9 February 2017. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Forces Afghanistan PAO)

Why All Army Civilians Should Explore Deploying Under the Army's Expeditionary Civilian Workforce Program

Garry Christman

Back around 2010, I started entering a bad period in my life. I retired from the active Army in October 2008. I missed being in uniform badly and felt I was starting my mid-life crisis, something we all dread. It became so bad in fact, that I was worried that it would end my marriage. To help deal with the situation, I entered counseling with my

parish priest. After counseling, I still felt no relief and became desperate for help. I began to pray constantly, asking God to show me the way. Around that time, a friend told me about the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce, which later became the Expeditionary Civilian Workforce. I discovered that I could deploy as an Army civilian, helping my craving to feel like



Marc Bourdeau, an Army Expeditionary Civilian Workforce (AECW) employee with the 405th Army Field Support Brigade, conducts a basic issue item inventory on an M113 Armored Personnel Carrier at the Coleman Army Prepositioned Stocks-2 worksite in Mannheim, Germany, 18 July 2023. Bourdeau is a quality assurance specialist with Army Field Support Battalion-Mannheim while on AECW status, but his regular job is located at Tobyhanna Army Depot, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Kevin Grimm; photo courtesy of DVIDS)

what I did for the Army mattered. My prayers had been answered!

I applied for deployment in 2013. Due to several personal situations, I couldn't deploy until April 2016. At that time, the process to deploy was controlled by the U.S. Central Command out of MacDill Air Force Base. Applying was extremely easy. I filled out a request for deployment, submitted it through the first O6/GS15 in my chain for approval, then sent it and my resume to U.S. Central Command. U.S. Central Command officials reviewed the application and compared it to current Civilian Expeditionary Workforce openings (at that time, most were in the Mideast region). If your skills matched those of a vacant position, U.S. Central Command would send you a letter of acceptance.

I received my letter of acceptance with a projected assignment as a J3 plans officer, U.S. Forces Afghanistan. I was extremely excited for several reasons when I received that letter. First, I knew Afghanistan was a combat area, something I found

to be extremely challenging. Second, I spent twenty-seven years on active duty with the U.S. Army. One of my dreams that went unfulfilled was to work in a battalion or brigade S3 shop. Seeing I would be working in J3 plans gave me a feeling that this was an assignment meant for me. Before I would deploy though, I'd have to go through two weeks of pre-deployment training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana.

While I was training in Indiana, I received several emails from the personnel office in Afghanistan. Most emails focused on in-processing and what I needed to do when I arrived. A few days before I left Camp Atterbury, I received an email saying the position I was being assigned to changed. I was no longer going to be a J3 plans officer. I was assigned as director, Plans and Operations, J1, U.S. Forces Afghanistan, a vacant GS-14 position (I was a GS-12 at the time). I was a bit depressed when I learned I wouldn't go to J3 Plans. Once I arrived, I found my new assignment an exciting experience that I would never forget.

I had served in a combat zone previously while I was an active-duty soldier. I deployed with the 1st Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery, Fort Bliss, Texas, to Jordan in February 2003. Part of my duties within the S2 shop included force protection. I traveled across Jordan with staff personnel conducting force protection inspections of our units. Operating in Jordan was a unique challenge. No PATRIOT unit had operated in the country previously. Our firing batteries were deployed at the king's palace, Amman's international airport, and three Jordanian military bases across the country. Communications and logistics were a constant challenge. A month or two into the war, our unit was redeployed to Fort Bliss.

As I stated earlier, the main reason I volunteered for deployment was because I missed my life in uniform. I found the experience to be the most rewarding personal and professional endeavor I could imagine. That's why I recommend Army civilians explore the opportunity to deploy.

Experiencing a challenging, real-world deployment stimulated my professional growth as an Army civilian. My deployment benefitted me in ways I never imagined.

- *Financial Benefits:* My earnings from Afghanistan provided financial security my family had not experienced before. My wife and I remodeled our home, paid off our auto loans, traveled with our grandchildren, visited family, and much more. We experienced financial peace and balance for the first time in a long time.
- *Spiritually Uplifting:* I am Roman Catholic and have been my whole life. While I was deployed, I oversaw volunteer services at our church on Bagram Air Base. I coordinated the schedule for our ushers, readers, and those who distributed the body and blood of Christ. It was the first time in my life I had dedicated so much of myself to the church. In return, I felt a closeness to God I'd never experienced. I'm fortunate that I still feel extremely close to God today.
- *Mental Well-Being:* As I got closer to God, I found myself worrying less and less. I find it

hard to explain how my anxiety levels dropped when I deployed to a combat zone, but they did. A coworker looked at me during leave from Afghanistan and told me I looked younger than I did before I left! Even now, almost seven years since I returned from Afghanistan, I feel my mental well-being has never been better.

- *Physical Health:* My deployment to Afghanistan made me realize I had to take better care of myself physically. It also helped me accept the fact that I can't do some of the things I did in the past. About a month after I arrived, I started running for the first time in eight years. After two to three months, I realized I couldn't continue running, so I started going to the gym. After another two to three months, I came to the decision the gym wasn't for me. I wanted to start something I could continue after I returned home. I started a routine of walking four to five days a week, which I've been able to continue. I feel better physically than I have since I was a soldier.
- *Proper Diet:* For years, the four food groups to me were candy, chips, sodas, and red meat. I realized I had to change my eating habits if I wanted to live healthier and happier. I began consuming more seafood and less beef, more vegetables and fewer desserts, more water and fewer sodas. I ate meat twice a week. I still made time for an occasional Subway sandwich or pizza from Pizza Hut. By changing my eating habits, I've improved my quality of life.

I've been accepted to deploy twice since I've returned. Once, my deployment was cancelled by the COVID pandemic. My next deployment was canceled by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. If my health and well-being remain good, I will volunteer for another deployment.

I strongly recommend deploying under the Expeditionary Civilian Workforce for all Army civilians. Although you may be working in field type conditions, eating in a chow hall, and living in a space the size of a closet, you will find it one of the most enjoyable professional experiences you can have. ■

Garry Christman served in the U.S. Army from September 1981 through September 2008, culminating his career as a Master Sergeant, 14Z (Air Defense Senior Sergeant). Upon his retirement, Christman began his career as an Army civilian professional. He currently serves as the operations officer, Army Management Staff College, Army University, Fort Leavenworth, KS.