

Women Discuss Role in Military's Humanitarian Missions

By Lt. j.g. Theresa Donnelly, Special to Diversity Directorate Public Affairs

WASHINGTON (NNS) -- A joint panel of women in uniform highlighted their role in recent humanitarian and disaster relief efforts during the 23rd annual Sea Services Leadership Association Women's Symposium in Washington, D.C. June 2.

"Serving in humanitarian missions was the highlight of my career. It was the most rewarding experience I have ever had. It made me feel useful and needed," said Navy Nurse Cmdr. Kim Lebel, a Purple Heart recipient who served in Cuba and Afghanistan.

The "Global Force for Good" panel consisted of four active-duty enlisted members and officers who had served in humanitarian aid projects in Afghanistan, Cuba, Africa and Iraq. One panelist also assisted with disaster relief efforts after the earthquake in Haiti Jan. 12.

Many of the women spoke about their roles helping people in need. Although their experiences were diverse, a few common themes emerged. One theme was that success while deployed depended on their ability to build good relationships with the local community.

Coast Guard Yeoman 1st Class Stephanie Winslow was deployed to Haiti in January as part of a security detail on Coast Guard cutter Tahoma. While deployed, she helped with maritime security operations with the Haitian coast guard in and around Port-au-Prince.

"We were always looking at ways to make things better; what we could do differently, better than the day before," said Winslow.

The women found ways to work with the local community to gain their respect and trust.

"At first, the men there would not look at me, talk to me, or shake my hand. But gradually, I was able to build a relationship. If you are sincere in your efforts and how you help them, they will protect you," said Winslow.

Another focus of the panel centered on ways the military can make long-term relief efforts sustainable in underserved areas and exactly how to provide the right type of aid.

Marine Corps Master Sgt. Julia Watson, who has deployed multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan, emphasized this concept when she spoke of an encounter with a shoemaker who was losing business based on relief teams providing the same service. Watson also said that when a school is built, there must be a plan in place for teachers and a curriculum.

"Building capacity with the locals is very, very important. You have to understand before you go into a country what they have available and what is it you can actually help with. You have to meet with the leaders in the area and that will eventually help you in building better infrastructure for the people," Watson said.

The session also highlighted some of the challenges faced by the military when delivering aid, such as encountering corruption, understanding the dynamics of tribal relationships, overcoming language barriers and how best to involve the community with solutions to their circumstances.

Nearly 500 people attended the session, which offered different perspectives on how the military conducts humanitarian aid.

"What I really liked about the panel was the diversity of the experiences that each woman had. There was the nurse who could relate to the medical side. Then, there was the Seabee who could offer that perspective. It was really interesting," said Navy Aviation Storekeeper 3rd Class (AW) Sarah Mattingly, stationed at Fleet Readiness Center Southwest in San Diego.

A key aspect common to all maritime services is the military's emphasis on providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Every day, U.S. forces are partnering with numerous countries around the globe, working with their armed services, conducting subject matter expert exchanges that share best practices and help make communities safer.

Working side-by-side with non-governmental organizations and local governments, service members are providing medical and veterinarian care, as well as building roads, schools, bridges and other needed infrastructure worldwide. The military also responds when disaster strikes, with the recent Haiti earthquake as the most recent example.

"[Being involved in humanitarian missions] has absolutely impacted me. I know for a fact that I would not be the person I am today, or be as good a person or leader had I not been exposed to those contingency operations and being able to see it firsthand. As a result, I believe I am an ambassador for what the service members are trying to do," said Master Chief Utilities Constructionman (SCW) Jamye Rainwater, a Joy Bright Hancock Award recipient assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Team 40.

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