

Making the trip home less of an adventure

New centers help GIs ease into civilian world

By J. KING CRUGER
Northern Italy bureau

VICENZA, Italy — The Army's new Transition Centers in Europe scored points with Pfc. Mark Harness after he attended a mandatory pre-separation briefing in Vicenza.

"I found out there was a pay discrepancy of \$4,000 I was entitled to," said Harness, who is assigned to Co E of the 502nd Aviation Regt at Aviano AB, Italy. He's getting out to work as an aircraft electrician.

His wife, Claudia Harness, who also attended the briefing at the Vicenza transition center, said she gathered a lot of information about her educational opportunities, plus benefits to which her husband is entitled.

"Being Italian, I didn't know much about the U.S. military (before attending the briefing)," Claudia Harness said.

The Vicenza Transition Center, one of the Army's newest, has been set up as a one-stop shop to provide a smooth transition for all soldiers, including retirees, if they choose, from the active-duty Army to the civilian world, said Ted N. Warden, the center manager.

The center permits soldiers to speed to the civilian world directly from Vicenza with no stop for out-processing in the United States. Soldiers may fly to the United States any day of the week on civilian flights, if that is their choice, with the tickets provided by their local transportation office, Warden explained.

"This service is not only for the soldiers assigned to Caserma Ederle here in Vicenza, but for all Army personnel in Italy, including Verona, Aviano, Camp Darby, Naples, Rome and Brindisi," Warden said.

The center at Vicenza became fully operational last month. It, along with five centers in Germany (at Mannheim, Hanau, Würzburg, Baumholder and Vilseck), plus nearly a dozen satellite operations, will serve the U.S. Army Europe. The Mannheim center, the Army's first in Europe, opened in late July.

The responsibility for operating and staffing the centers has been contracted out to Resource Consultants



Warden

Inc. of Vienna, Va.

"We have only three on the staff of the Vicenza center, plus a staffer at finance, as opposed to six people who formerly performed similar functions working out of the personnel office," Warden said.

The centers in Europe have been established because of the drawdown. Formerly, European-based soldiers were out-processed, with frequent delays, in the United States at either Fort Dix, N.J., or Fort Jackson, S.C., said Hal Greer, who as transition services manager at Vicenza oversees the transition center.

"Dix offered some economics because it was at a gateway to the United States, but Fort Jackson was a nightmare, especially for families, some traveling with animals. It (sending soldiers and their families there) was a tremendous cost to the military, and people were nothing but numbers," said Greer.

Greer said the one-stop centers will mean big savings for the Army by eliminating unnecessary transportation and temporary duty costs and will save troops time and hassle.

"The centers can fix any problem for any soldiers, no matter where they come from," Greer said.

The Vicenza center conducts mandatory pre-separation briefings monthly for soldiers separating within 120 days. Following the session, during which soldiers are briefed by experts on housing issues, finance, education, and medical and legal affairs, appointments are made for each soldier to review records, meet with finance and set in motion the issuance of orders and discharge papers.

"We want to have orders in the hands of the soldiers not later than 90 days prior to departure ... not 90 days prior to the separation date, especially when considerations for leave and/or permissive TDY come into play in conjunction with separation," Warden said.

The center will make things much easier for those seeking to leave Europe, Warden said. "It (the center) doesn't cut down on paperwork, but on the time it consumes." The center pledges to treat all its customers, including those retiring or getting any kind of discharge, in the same helpful manner.

"How people feel about their time in the service depends upon how they felt when they left the service," said Greer.

Frankfurt facility becoming Air Force standby hospital

By MARK KINKADE
Staff writer

The American military medical presence is returning to Frankfurt, Germany, but only in case of war.

The Air Force officially takes over the former 97th General Hospital in Frankfurt in a ceremony today. The hospital will be reflagged the 717th U.S. Air Force Contingency Hospital and will be used as an emergency medical center in case of war or natural disaster, according to Maj. Hugh Paterson, commander of the facility.

A contingency hospital, he said, is a fully functional medical facility capable of providing a full range of care for casualties. However, the facility is closed and will not be staffed until the Department of Defense determines that extra medical care could be required.

Before the drawdown, the military in Europe maintained 10 such facilities. During the Persian Gulf War, eight standby hospitals in Europe were activated, Paterson said.

The Air Force reduced its contingency hospitals to one — in Wiesbaden, Germany. When renovation costs for the Wiesbaden facility were estimated at about \$40 million, the Air Force opted to take over the Frankfurt hospital. The Army had invested nearly \$60 million in renovations at Frankfurt before closing its doors during the summer.

"From a taxpayer point of view, it made better sense to keep the Frankfurt facilities and return the Wiesbaden hospital to the German government," Paterson said. The Wiesbaden hospital is scheduled for return to the German government in 1996.

The facilities swap also means the Air Force will double its floor space over the Wiesbaden hospital, as well as the number of available surgical rooms, Paterson said. The hospital will have a capacity of up to 500 beds.

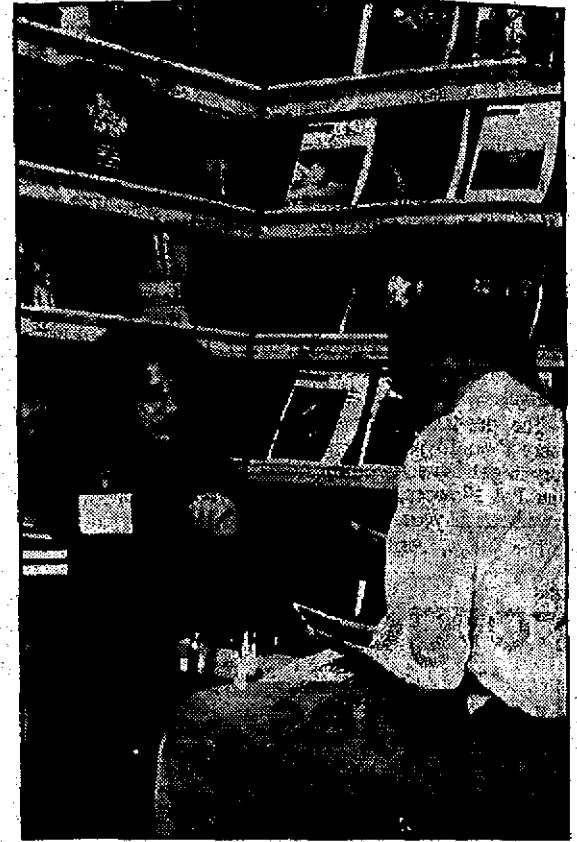
Also, the Air Force expects to save about \$3.5 million in costs each year by maintaining the Frankfurt hospital.

Paterson said a standby staff of 20 technicians will maintain equipment at the hospital. Most of the equipment is coming from closed contingency hospitals, including Wiesbaden. In recent months, the Air Force has transferred nearly \$9 million worth of equipment to the facility, he said.

The hospital was built before the German invasion of Poland in 1939, said Barbara Slifer, a spokeswoman for the European Health Services Support Area. Polish laborers constructed the facility, which used innovative construction techniques, including imbedding steam-heating pipes in support walls to strengthen the structure.

During World War II, the hospital was used by the German air force as a luxury medical facility, and some injured prisoners of war were kept there. The facility wasn't bombed during allied attacks on Frankfurt.

U.S. troops took the hospital in 1945. During its time as a U.S. medical center, it was the second-largest in Europe and treated casualties from various conflicts, including more than 7,000 U.S. and allied soldiers during the Persian Gulf War, Slifer said. Most of those patients had been suffering from noncombat injuries or illnesses.



S&S: Chuck Goff

Word search

Amy Pastan, senior editor of art and photography for the Smithsonian Institution Press, examines new books and postcards with a representative of 12 university presses in the United Kingdom while at the 47th Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany. The fair opened Wednesday in the Frankfurt convention center to those who work with books professionally. It will be open to the public Saturday and Sunday. About 330,000 titles will be on display from 6,497 publishing companies around the world.

Fogged-in staff gets a break on commute

By KEVIN DOUGHERTY
Kaiserslautern bureau

SPANGDAHLEM AB, Germany — All non-essential personnel in the Spangdahlem military community were given two extra hours to get to work Wednesday when a thick fog blanketed the



Eifel region and much of southern Germany.

Since no vehicle accidents were reported Wednesday morning, the measure of prevention apparently produced the desired effect.

"Fog has been a factor in accidents recently," said Capt. Eric Butterbaugh, the chief of public affairs for the base.

Of particular concern to base officials is the 10-mile winding stretch between the Bitburg annex — formerly part of Bitburg AB — and Spangdahlem.

"The fog was thick, it was heavy," said Senior Airman Robin Jackson, a base spokeswoman. "You couldn't see 10 feet ahead of you."

The majority of military personnel on the day shift typically report for duty by 7:30 a.m., Jackson said. The two-hour reprieve gave everyone enough time to slowly negotiate his or her way through the fog, which dissipated as the morning wore on.

While delays caused by snow are not uncommon, a weather forecaster told 1st Lt. Don Borchelt, a base spokesman, that he could not recall in his four years such a respite because of fog.