Ft. Carson Training Our Troops for Battle

Our company has a long history of doing all it can to support the men and women of our armed forces. It is both a personal and institutional philosophy begun by our founders, Roy and Estelle Kelley, prior to World War II. I have written before about how my parents were entertaining a Navy captain and his wife for Sunday breakfast at our home on December 7, 1941, the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack. Throughout World War II, our home was a gathering place for soldiers, sailors, and Marines headed for battle on distant Pacific islands. Nearly 70 years later, the tradition of providing support and hospitality for our service personnel continues at Outrigger and OHANA hotels in a number of important ways, including our CEO David Carey’s chairmanship of the Military Affairs Council of the Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii, and membership in the national U.S. Air Force Civic Leaders Group.

With that background, this week, I jumped at an opportunity to join a group of businessmen and -women invited to learn more about the training of today’s soldiers with a visit to Fort Carson, Colorado, located at the foot of Rocky Mountains and Pikes Peak, about 80 miles south of Denver. Since it first opened in 1942, this base, named in honor of the famous Army Scout “Kit” Carson, has been used to train hundreds of thousands of men and women prior to deployment into the field to defend our country and the cause of freedom.

Today, although their work in Iraq and Afghanistan is garnering fewer headlines than only a year or two ago, troops are still being trained and are heading into harm’s way for duty in those countries. They go better prepared because of their training at Fort Carson, which I had the opportunity to observe and briefly, safely, and painlessly experience.

Our first stop was the base dining facility where we had lunch with the troops. There was a variety of excellent, healthy food available, and I quickly realized why the old term “mess hall” has been dropped.

Then we went into the field where a replica of a small Iraqi town has been erected, complete with a government administrative building, hospital, and hotel. Synthetically generated sounds and odors add a touch of reality. Live Arabic-speaking “locals” in typical dress are often present, as well as plastic dummies equipped with electronic monitoring devices. Each room in the buildings is equipped with cameras and microphones that record the action.

Trainees learn how to enter the village, eliminate enemy combatants, and get the cooperation of other villagers. After-action reviews of video and sound recordings help the troops evaluate and learn from their successes and missteps.

Later, I visited the multimillion-dollar facility where the troops are trained to drive tanks and armored Humvees into battle using the latest in simulator technology. Surrounded by a 360-degree display of desert landscape or perhaps the buildings of a town, trainees “drive” their “vehicles” and employ “firepower” without burning a single gallon of fuel or actually blowing anything up. Yet the realism of the “action” is unbelievable.

We also had an opportunity to say farewell and Godspeed to a group of men and women in the 71st Ordinance Group who are about to leave for a tour of duty in Iraq. Members of this group are specially trained to neutralize and destroy IEDs (improvised explosive devices), which have taken such a toll on our troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan. For many members of the unit, this will be their second, third and even fourth deployment into a battle zone.

At the end of the day, base commander Maj. Gen. Mark Graham and his charming wife Carol invited our group and other officers and non-commissioned officers to their home for refreshments.

Altogether, Fort Carson and the more than 20,000 men and women who work and train there impressed me in a great many ways. I felt honored and extremely fortunate to be able to see the facility first-hand and to personally thank these members of our armed forces for all they do for our country.