

# A firsthand view of military operations in the Middle East

By **BOB STINE**, Contributing writer | Friday, Jun 2 2006 12:24 PM  
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I recently had the privilege of attending the U.S. Department of Defense's annual Joint Civilian Orientation Conference.

This conference has run continuously at least once and sometimes twice a year since 1948. The purpose of the conference is for interested civilians to gain a greater understanding of the mission of our military and our national defense. It is a Pentagon outreach program targeted at community leaders, educators and business leaders from throughout the United States.



Photo by courtesy of Bob Stine  
Tejon Ranch President and CEO Bob Stine watches flight operations from the captain's command chair on board the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan in the Persian Gulf. Stine's visit to the ship was part of the U.S. Department of Defense's annual Joint Civilian Orientation Conference, a program set up to help interested civilians gain a greater understanding of the mission of our military and our national defense.

JCOOC participants attend briefings by senior military and civilian officials interspersed with hands-on experience observing exercises, participating in training and interacting with troops stationed across the world.

The most recent conference started on a Sunday afternoon at U.S. Central Command ("CentCom") at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, Fla. It was followed by an overnight flight on an Air Force C-17 to observe troops and operations in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.

The nearly 50 civilian participants arrived back at MacDill Air Force Base the following Sunday morning after a second 16-hour flight across the Atlantic.

The area of responsibility ("AOR") for U.S. Central Command encompasses 27 different countries ranging from the horn of Africa through the Middle East into a number of independent countries formerly a part of the Soviet Union. The area has an estimated population of nearly 670 million people.

Upon our arrival in Kuwait, we were met by waiting Black Hawk helicopters that took us to training facilities in the Kuwaiti desert. Thus began a whirlwind of both indoor and outdoor briefings by some of America's finest and brightest military leaders.

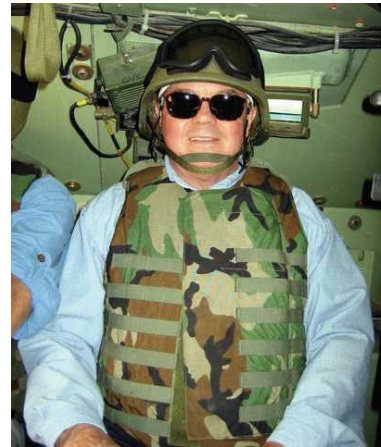
While the majority of information we received was not classified, it was one incredible education concerning the depth, breadth and commitment of our young men and women dedicated to their mission and their fellow countrymen.

We were privy to some classified information; we were asked to close our notebooks and not repeat it once it was revealed. For example, one can read in Time or Newsweek magazine about Predator

unmanned aerial vehicles flying over Iraq that are directed and piloted by Air Force pilots actually sitting in control rooms at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas. What we were asked not to share are the number and locations of the predators, the frequency of their activity and the absolutely startling and amazing technological accuracy with which they can assist our men and women on the ground.

During the week, we heard briefings from generals and admirals from all of our military branches, including the Coast Guard. As we moved through the region each day, we had unqualified and unrestricted access to anyone from enlisted men to top-level officers. All briefings allowed significant and ample time for questions and answers.

One of the midweek highlights was a flight from Navy Central Command in Bahrain to a tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Ronald Reagan. After observing various flight operations, which are going on 24/7 in the Persian Gulf, we were treated with an end-of-the-day catapult off the Reagan for the short flight back to Bahrain.



We concluded our Middle East visit with a day with the U.S. Air Force at Al Udeid Air Base outside Doha in Qatar. It is a massive air facility shared with the Qatar military.

The conditions in this desert facility, where summer temperatures reach 125 degrees, made me think an August day in Bakersfield is not so bad after all.

Before re-boarding our C-17 for the long flight back to Tampa, we were greeted by Gen. John Abizaid, Commander of CentCom. In response to several tough questions, Gen. Abizaid said, “Let’s face it: we came into this war with a short war theory. We have a long war problem. The enemy knows it cannot defeat us head-on.

“So it uses other measures, including improvised explosive devices and world media exploitation. The single most important thing to be done in the global war on terror is to stabilize Iraq and that is going to take time.”

Regardless of one’s feelings or opinions about our presence, strategy, role or potential success in Iraq, participants in this trip unanimously concluded that our country’s leaders have at their disposal an extremely well-managed institution, giving them enormous power far beyond the nation’s borders.

However divided our country may be in supporting how that power is being exercised by our leaders, I unequivocally support those in uniform who have been asked to exercise that power. Having had the honor and an education for a week, it is impossible not to be proud and totally impressed by the courageous, committed, enthusiastic, focused and competent young people in our military forces.

They are led by a cadre of senior military flag officers who are some of the most educated, best and brightest of their generation.

***Bob Stine is the President and CEO of Tejon Ranch and a resident of Bakersfield.***