

MILITARY DUTY

THE WAR ON TERRORISM THRUSTS BROWARD ARMY OFFICER INTO LIMELIGHT AND AWAY FROM HOME

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The events of 9/11 thrust a Pembroke Pines man into the national spotlight in an unexpected way.

Army Lt. Colonel Bill Costello serves as the Deputy Director of Public Affairs for the U.S. Southern Command in Miami, a position that led him to appear on CNN and the other major networks frequently in the weeks and months that followed the terrorist attack.

"From the first day we received calls from journalists who wanted to know what was happening and how the military was responding," Costello said. "Then with the anthrax threat, the air force combat patrols over Miami and the detainees at Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), we had to provide many answers, including information about the role of the Homestead base."

As the war in Afghanistan heated up and the coalition forces began to relocate Al Qaeda prisoners to Cuba, Costello found himself at the center of one of the operations most visible activities.

Costello spent 96 days on the Caribbean island coordinating the coverage of major news organizations. "We had all of the big media outlets there including CNN, Fox News, the *Sun-Sentinel* and Al Jazeera," the Arabic equivalent to CNN, Costello explained. "In twelve weeks we hosted reporters from 25 nations including Australia, Japan and Russia."

"It was a very exciting time," Costello said. "I volunteered to do it. It gave me a chance to get out of the cubicle and to serve in the midst of a unique detention."

Explaining that the military operation was different than the Gulf War or Pearl Harbor, Costello said, "The American population had drifted away from understanding what we (the military) do. I had the opportunity to explain to the U.S. people what the military is doing."

Costello has been in the military for 19 years, 11 of them in public affairs. "The army sent me to public affairs school where I learned how to engage the media and how to get the story out," Costello said.

But, his job involves more than just that of a press secretary. "I also learned the role that a free press plays in our study," he said. "I often have to help my superiors understand that the press is a watchdog and that they have to explain what is going on. That means that they often have to ask tough questions."

Costello said that he encourages military officials to "give forthright answers and to explain things so that people can understand them."

Serving as the Southern Command's public voice during the early days of the Cuba operations put a stress on Costello's family. His wife Crystal and three children, John and Clara who are five year old twins and two-month old Will found it difficult for him to be gone for 12 straight weeks.

"My wife was also in the military, so she understands the demands of military life," Costello said. "However, this was my first extended absence, so it was difficult for her and the children."

"We kept in touch by phone and email and we bought a digital camera so we could send photos," he explained.

The couple's church played a big role in helping them through the long separation. "Community Christian Church (in Plantation) is a very friendly church that welcomes fresh faces as if they had been there many times," Costello said. "It has become our family to us here when we have had to do without our own family."

"While I was in Cuba, I missed my wife's birthday, our anniversary and valentine's day," Costello said. "The church stepped in and helped out. It's like a little community."

"People often rally around a family when the dad is away," explained Kent Mezger, outreach minister for the church. "I know that Crystal received support from the Mothers of Pre Schoolers group."

Mezger said that the church serves a number of transient families, including those in the military, and works hard to include them in the church's program. "We want to make them feel like they are at home and we try to integrate them into the church's life," he said.

Mezger said that on the Costello's wedding anniversary, a photo of Costello was projected in the sanctuary as a part of their celebration—even though he was in Cuba. "I worked behind the scenes with the church to pull off that surprise," Costello said.

"Community Christian provides us with spiritual fulfillment," Costello said. "It is a mix of enthusiasm with a solemn environment."

In addition to regular Sunday activities, Costello plays on the church's softball team and his wife is involved in a Bible study and MOPS-Mothers of Pre-Schoolers.

Costello said that with the war in Afghanistan winding down, interest in the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay has waned. "Once the news media tell the story, they move on to other things," he explained. "But the U.S. forces are still in Cuba and there are 564 detainees still there. The story continues."

Costello's military career continues as well. "We have been here two years and I have to decide soon whether to accept a new appointment or to retire."

"Some times I wonder if I am making a difference," he said. "But, I know that with the support of my family and my church, I have been fortunate to be a part of a successful operation and have had a successful career."

Costello said that he is likely to sign up for another assignment. "I'm not going to give up on a good thing," he said.

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