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Protocol officer goes downrange with Civilian Expeditionary Force

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Merry Weeks, director of Executive Services for the Combined Arms Center, recently returned from a six-month deployment to the Middle East where she provided protocol support for various missions. Primarily based in Kuwait, Weeks also worked in Qatar and several other locations while deployed.

“I received an e-mail from my career field that announced Army Central Command was looking for a protocol officer to serve for six months,” Weeks said. “The Civilian Expeditionary Force makes these type of opportunities available. You have to apply, take courses to prepare for deployment and attend training once selected.”

According to the Civilian Personnel website, it is Army policy that civilians will be used to support the military in carrying out their missions. Installations and activities have plans in place to support military contingency operations and all other levels of mobilization.

“It was an invaluable experience that I would not trade for anything,” Weeks said. “But, I don’t want my contribution to take anything away from the soldiers in uniform I was there to support. No one was shooting at me. The soldiers are true heroes and continuing a vital mission for our nation.”

Weeks said that qualifying for this type of assignment is competitive, and Department of Defense civilians who would like to volunteer for consideration must meet specific requirements to be eligible for deployment. Most tour lengths range from 179- to 200-day deployments.

“In preparation for the deployment, we were put through some of the training in necessary survival basics while in that theater,” Weeks said. “Much of this training was tactical in nature and made me truly appreciate the knowledge and skills our actual soldiers possess. We participated in vehicle rollover exercises. We learned about how improvised explosive devices may be planted in common areas but disguised to look like ordinary harmless objects.”

Protocol officers organize and plan for official visits within their jurisdiction, such as the visits of delegations, diplomats and royalty. Weeks said that, generally, they offer hospitality and produce ceremonial events, as well as provide advisory or consulting services related to protocol matters.

“I have been working in my job at Fort Leavenworth for 28 years and love it. We are very busy here. And, prior to deploying I let them know I was accustomed to being very busy. So, no big deal,” Weeks said. “Even though I was duly warned about how busy I would be, I was in for a surprise when I arrived in country because the job was extremely busy. Kuwait is the stopping point for all major officials and dignitaries coming into the theater.”

Weeks said her duties also required managing itineraries of both military and civilian dignitaries. She performed myriad tasks that included managing details of specific events and providing escort officers with information regarding the specific protocol requirements of attendees and guests. Her office also prepared seating arrangements and ensured expected guests would receive their formal invitations early enough to respond professionally.

“During an event, we are responsible for assisting the escort officers as necessary, as well as establishing procedures for receiving the RSVPs,” Weeks said. “We often determine the dress code for occasions and even the type of gifts to be offered, depending on the type of event.”

The Civilian Readiness program ensures that qualified Army civilian employees are available in adequate numbers and skills to meet worldwide mission requirements during periods of national emergency, mobilization, war, military crisis or other contingency.

“We lived in the same environment as the deployed soldiers,” Weeks said. “We did physical training. We endured the 120-degree heat. I cannot express enough how much this opportunity gave me a greater appreciation for what soldiers actually do in tactical environments. I work with great soldiers every day — now I can more fully relate to another important part of who they are professionally.”

For more information about the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce application process, visit https://www.apps.cpms.osd.mil/CEW_ApplicationForm/Home/Splash.



PHOTO/ PHOTO COURTESY MERRY WEEKS

U.S. Army Central Protocol Officer Merry Weeks takes her first helicopter ride from Camp Arifjan to Camp Buehring Sept. 19, 2016. Weeks, director of Fort Leavenworth Executive Services, deployed to Kuwait from July to December 2016. Photo courtesy Merry Weeks

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