



AMERICAN FORCES INFORMATION SERVICE **NEWS ARTICLES**

America Supports You: 'Project Ark' Sets Sail in Hawaii

By Monique Reuben
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Aug. 25, 2006 – As Cheryl Janus reflected on Project Ark, a program for military teens she helped organize this summer, she realized the “ark” did in fact float.



Project Ark participants and chaperones take time for a group photo on the deck of the battleship USS Missouri. Project Ark brought teenage children of deployed servicemembers to Hawaii in July to interact and develop skills for coping with their parents' deployment. Courtesy photo
'(Click photo for screen-resolution image);[high-resolution image](#) available.

The “ark” in Project Ark stands for “At Risk Kids.” The program, the first of its kind, was designed to provide at-risk military dependent teenagers, ages 13-17, the opportunity to interact with their peers who are struggling with similar issues.

“We weren’t sure sometimes what it would look like. We weren’t sure if we were going to have to put the kids in a Hawaiian Polynesian canoe and row them from LA to Hawaii, but we never gave up,” Janus, a retired U.S. Navy captain, said of a project that some doubted would come to fruition.

Last August, retired Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Steve Schilling approached Janus with an idea for a military dependent program in Hawaii, after realizing many children were struggling with the effects of their parents’ deployment.

Project Ark set sail last month, bringing a respite to 20 military dependent teenagers experiencing stress and anxiety related to their parent’s deployment. They lived together aboard the USS Missouri Battleship in Hawaii for a week.

The teens, mostly from California, five officers from the Los Angeles Police Department, and the four-person Project Ark team chaperoned the teens during their stay. The Project Ark team members were volunteers with Homefront America, a nonprofit organization that supports military servicemembers and their families with a wide range of services.

The participants were able to manage their stress and develop a more positive outlook on their parents’ role in the military by taking educational tours of Hawaii’s military memorials, talking with World War II veterans and servicemembers who returned from deployments in Iraq. They also met Medal of Honor winners and participated in a leadership-building and problem-solving seminar.

Now home, the teens are still talking about the friendships they made and how the experience impacted their lives.

“Before I went, I didn’t really know any other kids from the military because we keep moving around. So this was a good chance to meet kids in the same situation as me and talk about what happened,” Sam No, 15, of Corona, Calif., said. “We learned new things and taught other kids new things, so it was a good way to get new ideas on how to deal with stuff when your parents get deployed.”

To be selected for the program, students were required to submit an essay describing issues they struggled with as a result of their parents’ deployment. The issues ranged from frustration and anger because of the parent’s long absence to fear about losing a parent in the war in Iraq.

“Sometimes I felt like he wasn’t safe over there and that he was missing parts of our lives,” Kassandra Wenrich, 13, of San Diego, said.

But Wenrich, whose father is a Marine deployed in Iraq for the past six months, said that after her experience with Project Ark, she sees things a little differently, especially after listening to a servicemember who was deployed in Iraq.

Army Reserve Staff Sgt. Jeffery Bernardino, with the 411th Engineer Battalion (Combat Heavy), spoke to the teens about his one-year deployment in Iraq and how it affected his family. He said watching his wife deal with the stress of his deployment allowed him to understand how the teens felt.

“Unfortunately, there are other casualties outside of the war zone,” he said. “There is a separate battle that is being fought at the homefront, and that’s with the families that have to deal with the separation.”

The main thing Bernardino said he wanted to stress was that there are positive things troops are doing in Iraq. He spoke about his unit’s efforts to rebuild communities in Iraq. Bernardino showed them a book his unit made filled with pictures from their missions that demonstrated some of the positive things they accomplished.

“I’m definitely more understanding for my dad because he goes through a lot every day. I know now that they are not forced to go there. They want to fight for their country and that’s why they got into the military,” Wenrich said.

Coming into the program, Rodney Tolosa, 14, from Hemet, Calif., said at first he had no idea what Project Ark would entail.

“When I thought about going to Hawaii, I thought I would just be going to beaches and stuff,” he said. “Then I found out I’d be going to memorials and stuff and I thought I wouldn’t like it, but it actually got fun,” he said.

The living conditions aboard the ship were similar to those that military servicemembers face during deployment. However, the teenagers were able to adapt.

“It was pretty tough. At first I couldn’t sleep because the beds were really small and the showers were running cold water, so it was tough, but then we all got used to it in like two or

three days,” No said.

“On the fourth day we were calling it our home,” he said.

Los Angeles police officer Jerry Hernandez, 31, of Corona, Calif., said one thing he noticed was the ability of the teens to solve problems.

He said No and Tolosa began taking other teens’ clothes and hand-washing them since they didn’t have laundry facilities. “They even used shampoo once to wash clothes,” Hernandez said.

No said he appreciated the chaperones.

“Since our parents were deployed, the chaperones were like our fathers and mothers over there. So they were really close to us,” he said.

No especially bonded with Hernandez, who said he received an e-mail from the teen expressing his appreciation of the program. No told Hernandez he now has a mission of his own: He wants to become a special weapons and tactics police officer in Los Angeles.

One of the highlights of the program occurred on the teens’ third day in Hawaii.

Dr. Michael E. Faran, a psychiatrist at Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Service at Tripler Army Medical Center, led an open discussion with the teens. He addressed alternatives to negative behavior, understanding the commitment and sacrifices of deployed parents and learning methods of managing stress.

Faran, a retired Army colonel, said he admired the teens’ openness during their week. He said they are normal kids dealing with stressors, and programs like Project Ark can be beneficial in helping them manage that stress during wartime.

“We’re finding out that this war is having a pretty dramatic affect on people because of the multiple deployments,” he said. “Our goal as child psychiatrists is to develop true resilience (so) after there’s an adverse event ... like the deployment of a parent, the kids come back even stronger and are better able to master things in their lives.”

Launching Project Ark was not an easy task, Janus said. She said many doubted the project would succeed because of the costs. It was hard for them to get funding at first, but once the memorials and groups in Hawaii realized the intent behind the project, she said they opened up their hearts and helped Project Ark set sail.

“It certainly made all of the hard work well worth it,” Janus said. “My hope is this that this can become a project that grows and is embraced by what the military addresses as quality of life issues, both for the uniformed members as well as their dependents.”