



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**

**Public Affairs Office
Honolulu District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Fort Shafter, Hawaii 96858-5440**

**Contact: Lacey Justinger
or Joseph Bonfiglio
Telephone: (808) 438-9862**

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Corps of Engineers Civilian Shares Overseas Contingency Operations Inspiration

By Lacey Justinger, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 02-10) “The moon is beautiful over Kandahar!”

Lauren Vizcarra, a civilian with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Honolulu District, who volunteered for an Afghanistan deployment, shared her experiences and journal entries in-between being sent to the bunkers during rocket attacks and performing her everyday duties as a data manager for the Corps in Afghanistan.

“We want our soldiers to go home safe and sound but until then, we try to give them a quality-of-life here,” she said.

Vizcarra states the one experience that personified this philosophy was her first ramp ceremony, where people gather to pay respects while sending a fallen United States servicemember home with honor.

She describes the ceremony as the singularly most moving moment that she has experienced so far. Uniformed and civilian, men and women from many different countries marched to the flightline, rendered a salute, and then stood at attention as the young sergeant’s unit carried his flag-draped coffin past with “graceful fluidity.” The song ‘Going Home’ was played on the bagpipes and followed by ‘Taps’ on the trumpet. The chaplain recited Psalm 23 and a short bio.

“The night was bitter cold and a cold wind was stirring above us, but it was beautifully solemn and almost cathedral like,” said Vizcarra. “I was frozen but somehow I felt warm. You could not help but be emotional, feel that lump stick in your throat and have tears roll down your face.”

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Vizcarra said after this experience she will attend all the ramp ceremonies no matter how late at night they are held.

“Being here in the place where this conflict is happening, drives all these feelings and philosophies home: it’s the least I could do for what he did for us,” she said. “In a place where a rocket attack often sends us to the bunkers, this event put it in a perspective. It gives more meaning to our everyday small responsibilities.”

During a six-month deployment at the Afghanistan Engineer District-South, Vizcarra controls access, provides training, offers troubleshooting guidance and developed a step-by-step weekly training to a resident management system and quality control system database besides teaching courses.

“The aspect of my job that I thrive upon is interacting with so many different nationals from all over the world: Afghanistan, yes, but also Egypt, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, India and Pakistan,” said Vizcarra. “I even did step-by-step training on the phone with a contractor in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.”

Although she credits her Corps teammates and the Soldiers with helping her face each day.

“It is because of this surprising “MASH”-like cast that I am able to find such meaning and value in what I do,” she said. “I can wake up every morning and have the strength to face it, all its tensions and anxieties, because I am surrounded by many people of like mind and purpose.”

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Cutlines:

Afghanistan Holiday: Laureen Vizcarra (left) celebrates Christmas with her Corps of Engineer coworkers during an Afghanistan deployment.

Afghanistan transportation: Laureen Vizcarra dismounts from a Humvee while deployed to Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.