

Col. Robert Lyman | ADC 2017 Military Leadership Award

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Setting a High Bar in the Lowcountry

By Barbara Bryant

“Meet and don’t be afraid to ask those who head civic organizations and other civilian leaders for help and advice on the challenges you face. It’s a way to get some great ideas for solutions.”

That’s the message Col. Robert Lyman will convey to the officer who succeeds him as commander of the 628th Air Base Wing and Joint Base Charleston (S.C.) as he prepares to move on to his next assignment as Director of Communications for Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. His policy of military-civilian outreach and collaboration has spawned beneficial initiatives inside and outside the fence that support the base’s mission while improving the quality of life for many people on base and in Charleston.

He has worked on these initiatives while running Joint Base Charleston, which hosts more than 60 Department of Defense and federal agencies. The 628th Air Base Wing supports more than 90,000 airmen, sailors, soldiers, Marines, Coast Guardsmen and their families. The base maintains \$7.5 billion in property and capital assets spanning three seaports, two civilian-military airfields, 39 miles of rail and 22 miles of coastline across almost 24,000 acres. The base focuses on six distinct missions: installation support, airlift and airdrop operations, training naval nuclear operators, deployable logistics, multi-mission warfighter support, and inter-agency cooperation.

A challenge all base commanders face is ensuring that the base has the resources and room it needs to carry out its mission while minimizing the amount of disruption its activities impose on the civilian communities that surround it. By partnering with the local governments and businesses and remaining sharply attuned to Charleston’s priorities and concerns, Lyman spearheaded some innovative solutions to a variety of communications, transportation and security challenges.

One major breakthrough was the signing of an agreement in March to tie the base in with Charleston County’s consolidated 911 call system. Previously, an emergency call from the base might be transferred to various agencies before a responder was dispatched. Now,

all local 911 calls and texts are fielded by the Charleston County Consolidated 911 Center, which relays the information immediately to the appropriate emergency response team, reducing response time and saving the base money.

Lyman also has dealt with potentially divisive safety and encroachment issues by reaching out to various stakeholders to devise mutually acceptable solutions.

He negotiated a potential issue with aircraft maker Boeing, which sought to build new facilities on one side of a shared civilian-military runway, a space the base wanted kept clear in case of emergencies. After consulting with the company, state commerce officials and other partners, a land swap was agreed to that would permit construction on the opposite side of the runway.

In addition, one of the base's gate entrances is near the city's civilian port, which caused heavy traffic jams for people headed to either facility.

"Col. Lyman brought together port, transportation and base security personnel to discuss how to improve traffic management. It's a simple approach, but he sees the importance of bringing all of the key people together to solve problems," said Mary Graham, chief advancement officer of the Metropolitan Charleston Chamber of Commerce, who works closely with Lyman on civilian-military issues.

Lyman also has worked closely with civilian emergency operations centers to evacuate base personnel before Hurricane Matthew in October 2016. To prepare for this contingency, he instructed the base's finance team to devise a plan to quickly reimburse service members for these evacuation expenses, in part by setting up an Emergency Family Activity Center where they could file reimbursement vouchers and take care of emergency-related problems affecting them or their dependents. As a result, when Hurricane Matthew hit South Carolina, more than 3,100 Air Force personnel already had been evacuated and had their expenses quickly reimbursed.

Lyman knows that education is a key issue for military families, and it is one that as the father of two daughters he shares. The elementary schools near the base historically have not had the highest academic ratings in the community, Graham noted.

"Several previous base commanders home-schooled their kids. But Col. Lyman has made a point of sending his kids to the school near the base," said Graham. "He believes it shows leadership, that military members should participate fully in the community. He and his wife are very active school parents and their kids are having a great experience there. In addition, the base supports the Palmetto Scholars Academy, a charter school for gifted

and talented students that recently moved from a very modest setting to more spacious and better equipped facilities on Joint Base Charleston to accommodate growing enrollment, which includes military dependents.” (See “OnBase Charter Boosts Students of Military Families” on Page 36.)

Joint Base Charleston is collaborating with civilian organizations on a variety of health-related initiatives. The 628th Air Base Wing and the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center are working with the Medical University of South Carolina and Palmetto Lowcountry Behavioral Health to coordinate mental health service continuity of care for active-duty service members. The base also is working with Trident USA Health Services and local hospitals to provide joint, continual medical education for civilian and military practitioners and share best practices, resulting in cost avoidance of \$900,000 per year in travel and training costs. The base also hopes to partner with local police and fire departments to conduct joint first-responder training, potentially in a single, dedicated facility that could be located on base and to co-locate a medical clinic on base in partnership with the VA hospital. The South Carolina National Guard has asked to create a readiness center on base with access to the airfield as well.

Open and frequent communication between the civilian and military communities is vital to identify and pursue these types of partnerships, Lyman pointed out.

“Offers to collaborate on mutually beneficial projects come from on and outside the base, through open dialogue and shared visions and needs,” he said. “The right relationships and a healthy vision lead to these conversations.”

In addition to these and other local initiatives, Lyman has reached out to the state to improve benefits for military personnel and their dependents, veterans and retirees with significant success. In 2016, for example, the South Carolina Military Base Task Force helped get a law passed that allows dependents of active duty personnel, veterans and retired personnel to immediately benefit from in-state tuition rates, waiving the mandatory one-year waiting period, a savings of up to \$9,000, explained task force Chairman Bill Bethea.

Lyman has made a variety of other suggestions on behalf of military families that the task force is pursuing. It has convinced the state board of education to fast-track state credentialing for military spouses who have out-of-state teaching credentials and won the same concession for lawyers. And the task force is working with the legislature to bring child care credentialing requirements in line with DOD’s.

“Col. Lyman’s constant availability, his willingness to reach out in an effective way to

make his and the base community's concerns known and to help us advocate on the base's behalf have been very beneficial from the task force's perspective," said Bethea.

Local residents also have the opportunity to salute and provide assistance to base personnel and their families through the Palmetto Military Support Group, a nonprofit organization that conducts fundraising, attends and coordinates celebratory events, and in other ways helps the military community. Many other organizations and groups hold events for base personnel and encourage them to participate in the community.

The community shows its support and appreciation for Joint Base Charleston in many other ways, Lyman noted.

"The Charleston region is very warm and welcoming to military families. They work hard to make this, not just a duty station but a home," he said. "We get invited to the RiverDogs baseball games and Battery soccer club events. So many organizations honor us, invite us to speak at local functions and work to involve us in their activities. It's been a pleasure to serve here."
