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## Fort Leonard Wood spotlights veterans, Part II

**FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo.** – Joining the Army on a whim turned out to be one of the best impulse decisions one veteran and Fort Leonard Wood employee ever made.

Joel McJessy, a Science Applications International Corporation combat developer for the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, said he was preparing to graduate from high school when he joined.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Honestly, I had no plans after high school and really did not know which direction I was going to go. I figured that I would do a four-year stint, get out and become a local police officer in Grove City, Ohio,” McJessy said. “One thing led to another — I met my wife, we had kids, and we decided to make it a career. I believe that was the best decision that I could have ever made.”

McJessy served in the Army from 1988 to 2009, retiring as a first sergeant in Company D, 795th Military Police Battalion, 14th Military Police Brigade.

“I wanted to keep working for the military, even as a civilian, because it is really all that I have known since the age of 18 when I joined,” McJessy said.

As a combat developer, he writes capability documents for new equipment or improvements for existing equipment to fill needed gaps for Soldiers on the battlefield.

“It makes me feel great knowing that I can still make a contribution to Soldiers,” McJessy said.

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Looking back at his career, McJessy said the most challenging aspect of being a Soldier is the culture shock.

“When I first enlisted, I really had to get used to the change in lifestyle and being away from Family, friends and everything that was normal to me, especially when my first duty station was Germany,” McJessy said.

The hardest times for McJessy came before deployments. He said one time his son hid his gear thinking that he couldn't leave without it, and the sight of his daughter breaking down as he left is something he will never forget.

“The toughest challenge for me was leaving my Family for deployments. There is a lot that goes through your mind, as you say goodbye to them,” McJessy said. “As I was loading up my car to head into the company, my daughter, who was 5 or 6 at the time, was standing, looking out the window at me crying her eyes out telling me not to go. It broke my heart.”

“It is at that point that you realize that the path that you have chosen as a service member is not an easy one and that you have to go, because that's a part of the job and that's what we do,” he added.

McJessy's first combat deployment was with the 218th Military Police Company out of Augsburg, Germany.

“My wife and I just got married in September 1990, and by the first week of December 1990 our company was deployed in support of Operation Desert Shield/Storm in the Persian Gulf,” he said.

During the six months, their main mission was collecting and transporting enemy prisoners of war from the battlefield to the internment facilities.

In April 2002, while stationed in Hanau, Germany, in the 127th Military Police Company, McJessy deployed to Kosovo in support of Operation Joint Guardian for a seven-month deployment.

“That was not a combat deployment, but more of a peace keeping, humanitarian mission. However, there were still a lot of atrocities that were happening all throughout the region due to the extreme ethnic tension,” McJessy said.

Shortly after he returned home from Kosovo, he was transferred to the 709th Military Police Battalion in Hanau and immediately started ramping up training for a deployment to Iraq.

In March 2003, he deployed with the 709th Military Police Battalion to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for a yearlong deployment.

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“Even after I retired from the Army, I took a job in Afghanistan as a contractor. My main mission there was to field new equipment to the troops all across the country. I spent the year of 2010 at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan,” McJessy said. “Although I was there in a non-military capacity, it was still in a combat zone, and on May 19, 2010, there was the largest coordinated attack on BAF.”

Numerous insurgents wearing suicide vests tried to gain access to BAF to cause mass casualties.

“The perimeter guards and Apache helicopter did a fine job at eliminating all of the threats,” McJessy said.

Even though working for the military can be a dangerous and demanding profession, McJessy said he has many fond memories from his time in service. His favorite memory — meeting his wife, who was an Army brat living in Germany with her Family.

“We went through a series of unannounced, unplanned meetings. We just sort of kept bumping into each other. I never would have thought that I would have joined the Army, get stationed in Germany and find the person who I was going to spend the rest of my life with. It’s funny how everything comes together,” McJessy said.

He said other good memories include traveling to different countries; raising his kids and watching them grow up in different areas of the world, field training exercises and meeting new people.

“You make lifelong friends in the Army,” McJessy said.

McJessy said the biggest change to the Military Police Corps since he retired is the technology.

“When I first came in we drove Volkswagen vans, and we were lucky if our lights and radios worked. Now, the MPs have all of these high-tech gadgets on top of their patrol cars,” he said.

McJessy is looking forward to Veterans Day, because he said he is planning to spend quality time with his wife and have a barbecue.

For McJessy one of the best ways to honor veterans — past, present and future — is to pray for them and their Families.

“I will say a prayer thanking them for their service and all of the sacrifices that they have made for this country. And pray for those who are deployed to return home safely to their Families,” McJessy said. “Secondly, I will raise a glass of my favorite beverage and toast to them for all that they have done.”

For more information, contact the Fort Leonard Wood Public Affairs Office at 573.563.4145.

*(This is the second of a series of stories, leading up to Veterans Day, highlighting just a few of the thousands of veterans working on Fort Leonard Wood.)*

*(Melissa Buckley is a Guidon photojournalist.)*

Encl. (1) Photo

Photo caption: Veteran Joel McJessy continues to serve Soldiers as a Science Applications International Corporation combat developer for the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence.

### *About Fort Leonard Wood*

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*Fort Leonard Wood is a thriving and prosperous installation that has evolved from a small basic training post 70 years ago to a premier Army Center of Excellence that trains more than 80,000 military and civilians each year.*

*Home to the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood now trains and educates service members and develops doctrine and capabilities for the Training and Doctrine Command's U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School, U.S. Army Engineer School, and U.S. Army Military Police School, three gender integrated Initial Military Training brigades, one of only five reception stations in the Army, and the Army's largest Noncommissioned Officers Academy.*

*Over the past several years, Fort Leonard Wood has received numerous additional responsibilities to include supporting the 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, a large Forces Command unit that is responsible for all deployable capabilities at Fort Leonard Wood. A colonel-commanded Marine Corps Detachment and an Air Force Detachment, which are both the largest on any Army installation, are located on Fort Leonard Wood; a large Navy Seabee Detachment and elements of the Coast Guard train here as well.*

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