

101st Airborne Specialist Peter Russo Has Rendezvous with Mountainside History Class

By LINDA B. CONDRILLO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

MOUNTAINSIDE — Fresh out of Arthur L. Johnson High in Clark, Peter Russo wasn't even old enough to purchase a pack of cigarettes when he enlisted in the Army National Guard.

The Garwood native, who spent most of his free time playing lacrosse and soccer, needed his mother's signature before going off to boot camp three-and-a-half years ago. Now, at the ripe old age of 20, Mr. Russo is a married man and a specialist in the 101st Airborne Division.

A graduate of the U.S. Army Airborne and Air Assault Schools, Specialist Russo recently spoke to the seventh-grade class at the Deerfield School in Mountainside about his military experience and what life is like in the Middle East.

Invited to the middle school by his childhood friend, social studies teacher Frederick McCarrick, the soldier addressed the students at a special assembly held in the cafeteria.

Mr. McCarrick told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, "I teach world cultures, and last year I suggested to my students that they begin e-mailing Pete. It was a good way to introduce another culture to the students."

"If they had questions about the

Middle East, Pete was able to give them a first-hand account," he added. "This year, with him being back in the States, it allowed me the opportunity to present the students with a living historical figure. I thought that this would be an interesting way for the seventh grade to get a first-hand look into another culture."

Wanting to "provide a visual" to the students so they could gain more knowledge about the war in Iraq, Spc. Russo began the assembly with a combat film — footage compiled by soldiers on missions from the 101st Airborne. After the 20-minute show, Spc. Russo fielded questions to the students, each of whom he commanded to "stand up" before speaking.

Tough questions came from the young teens, some more up on current events than others. One student asked, "What's your position on the President's policy going into Iraq?"

The soldier responded, "We have to take orders as soldiers. Police departments don't sit down and say 'I can't fight crime today.' It's my duty to serve this country. And my particular duty is to provide personal security detail for a lieutenant colonel."

Mr. Russo noted, "When I'm with him, his life is in my hands."

The students were drilled in a vocabulary lesson, asked to define some

key words which are taught to all soldiers in basic training, the "seven Army values" — loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage, and then to decipher an imperfect Army acronym. (The first letters of each spell the word "ldrrshp.") The soldier remarked, "The Army doesn't spell very well."

The soldier recently spoke to the seventh-grade class at Deerfield School in Mountainside about the war. When students asked him how he endured the grueling basic training for combat, he answered, "How do you feel when you have homework? You do it, right? It's tough sometimes, but I'm strong enough to tune it out. The mental strength is the basic thing." He added, "The main thing is to take pride in what you are doing."

The students were intrigued by the soldier's uniform, bedecked with medals and ribbons. Standing up high on a bench in the packed lunchroom, the soldier explained the meaning behind each decoration. Noting the blue cord around his arm, he said, "The blue cord represents the brotherhood and is what identifies us as infantrymen."

The Class A uniform is quite a contrast from the Army-combat uniform he wears when in Iraq (plus 50 pounds of body armor), where temperatures regularly soar into the 100s, when it's not pouring rain.

Spc. Russo told the students, "There are only two seasons in Iraq — dry and wet." He noted, "The biggest problem in the heat is staying hydrated and getting enough potassium and electrolytes, so you don't become a heat casualty."

Another student asked him about the loneliness of being deployed in Iraq. He noted that he felt fortunate to have a laptop to send e-mails to his wife and family members.

Spc. Russo said, "I have to think back to the good days and stay motivated so I don't lose sight of the bigger picture. While we're over there, we see the good and the bad, and I focus on the good."

While he wasn't sure where he would be deployed next, the soldier remarked, "The 101st has many more rendezvous with destiny."

The newspaper asked Spc. Russo what Americans at home could do for the troops serving in Iraq. He gave high marks for the Soldiers' Angels organization, whose mission is to provide aide and comfort to any of the armed forces and their families. Visit their website at soldiersangels.org to learn more.

Spc. Russo is the son of Linda Russo and the late Jerry Russo of Garwood.



THE SUN SETS IN IRAQ...Spc. Peter Russo stands high atop a HMMWV (High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) somewhere in the Middle East. The soldier recently spoke to the seventh-grade class at Deerfield School in Mountainside about the war.

School Allergy Response Bill Becomes Law

TRENTON — Governor Jon Corzine recently signed into law legislation sponsored by Senator Tom Kean, Jr., Assemblyman Eric Munoz and Assemblyman Jon Bramnick, all LD-21, regarding access to epinephrine for students at risk of life-threatening allergic reactions.

The bill amends current state law governing the administration of epinephrine, medication that is key to surviving a life-threatening allergic reaction. It requires that there is always a nurse or staff member trained in its use available to assist a student in an emergency. Anaphylactic reactions can cause suffocation in a matter of minutes.

"This law will protect students by ending any confusion that could have jeopardized them," Mr. Kean said. "In some people, exposure to a trace amount of a food can cause a severe reaction. This law safeguards such students, helping make sure the medication can be quickly accessed and by requiring school districts to designate and train employee volunteers to administer epinephrine if a school nurse is not present at the scene."

"Nothing frightens a parent more than the thought of something happening to their children," Mr. Munoz said. "It is imperative that when an individual begins showing symptoms of anaphylactic shock that epinephrine is administered as quickly as possible."

Under current law, the designation of delegates by school districts is authorized but not required.

The new law also calls for members of the medical-education and food-allergy communities to develop guidelines for development of a policy for the management of food allergies in the school setting.

"The state Health and Senior Services Department estimates that nearly 100,000 children in New Jersey suffer from food allergies," Mr. Bramnick said. "It is essential that these students are able to fully participate in the school experience without fear or risk."

Report Cites NJ Open Government Compliance

AREA — The New Jersey Foundation for Open Government (NJFOG) last week released a report highlighting the weaknesses and strengths of the state Open Public Meetings Act. This NJFOG report provided recommendations on how to change a "culture of secrecy."

"Our report takes a penetrating look at where New Jersey stands on government transparency and public participation," said NJFOG President Elizabeth Mason.

Fondly known as the "Sunshine Law," the 1975 act conveys a spirit of transparent government, with public participation at the heart of the process. According to the NJFOG: "Over the years, though, poor practices have gained footholds because of limited enforcement of the current statute. Moreover, the advance of new technologies has raised questions not envisioned when the Legislature adopted the law three decades ago. The need for reform grows more pressing by the day."

Simply reworking old legislation will not be enough to create positive change, the NJFOG says. Along with re-evaluating the law, the NJFOG calls for all levels of government to begin more systematic training for public employees and public officials concerning their obligations under the law. A plain-language guide would help public officials as well as the public, they say.

"There is currently a wide variation in open public meetings prac-

tices in New Jersey," said Suzanne Piotrowski, Ph.D., an assistant professor of public affairs and administration at Rutgers University-Newark. Ms. Piotrowski and Erin Borry wrote the report after studying the history of the act, comparing it to those in other states, and examining how it works in practice.

"To truly make meetings more accessible to the public, the culture of secrecy surrounding public meetings needs to be changed," Ms. Piotrowski said. "This culture will not be changed with a new law alone. Training officials in their responsibilities and educating the public are absolutely necessary steps."

Among other things, the report recommends:

Minutes should completely and accurately reflect what transpired at a meeting, and be released within an explicit time limit.

Closed sessions should not be used for routine matters, and discussions must be limited to announced subjects.

Notices and agendas should be timely and provide sufficient information for the public to know what will occur at a meeting.

Regular allowance must be made for public comment during a meeting.

In keeping with recent court decisions, the public must be allowed to video or audio-tape meetings.

Procedures for electronic meetings must be clear.

Where violations occur, stricter sanctions should be imposed. When the public is forced to take legal action, the attorney fees should be recoverable.

The NJFOG believes training should apply to anyone who serves on a public body, as well as employees who deal with public requests for information. Additionally, the NJFOG recommends the creation and distribution throughout the state of a plain-language guide to the Sunshine Law. The Legislature and Administration also should consider the creation of an oversight body or office with the power to enforce the law, its officials say.

"Our hope is that our report will be helpful for municipalities when they examine their own meeting procedures," Ms. Piotrowski said.

"As a next step, NJFOG will work with the Legislature and Administration to improve the law and ensure its enforcement," Mr. Mason said.

Mountainside Recreation Dept. Plans 3 Overnight Trips

MOUNTAINSIDE — Three overnight trips have been planned for residents of Mountainside this year by the recreation department. Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos in Connecticut, Cooperstown in New York, and a Southern Tour are on the calendar.

The casino trip will take place on April 26-27 and includes one night at the Two Trees Inn at Foxwoods, food credit, keno credit, pull tab and breakfast. After a short ride to Mohegan Sun, a food credit and bet coupon are part of the package. Round-trip motorcoach transportation from and to Mountainside is included. The trip costs \$175 per person based on double occupancy or \$215 for a single.

A multi-day trip to upstate New York on May 22-24 includes two nights accommodation, two breakfasts, two dinners, two lunches, Baseball Hall of Fame, Fenimore Art Museum, local winery and the Mohonk Mountain House. Round-trip motorcoach transportation from Mountainside is included, as are gratuities, taxes, luggage handling and an escort. A deposit is due before April 1, and the balance (\$395 per person based on double occupancy or \$495 for a single) is due before May 1.

Travel to the South is scheduled on September 7-13 to Old Savannah and Charlestown. The trip includes six nights accommodation, six breakfasts, six dinners, two lunches, a plantation tour, tickets to the Alabama Theatre and the Carolina Opry and an Old Time Trolley ride. Round-trip motorcoach transportation from Mountainside, gratuities, taxes, luggage handling, and an escort are included in the price. A deposit is due before June 1, and the balance (\$925 per person based on double occupancy or \$1,225 for a single) is due before August 1.

Checks for all trips must be made payable to Detour Travel and delivered to the Mountainside Recreation Department, 1385 Route 22 East. Call the Mountainside Recreation Department at (908) 232-0015 or Detour Travel at (973) 663-8497 for more information.



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