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Then and Now -

Division 10's Martin Abeyta, pictured at left on the job at Metro and at right on duty in the UAE, is named Airman of the Year while in Kuwait. Abeyta has worked for Metro for 28 years.



Metro Mechanic Returns from Three Tours of Duty in Middle East

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Sept. 17, 2008) When Martin Abeyta learned that he had been named the California Air National Guard Airman of the Year, he was stationed at the Ali Al Salem air base in Kuwait, dispatching dozens of vehicles each day to carry supplies and personnel.

Abeyta, a mechanic "A" for Gateway Division 10, was on his third tour of duty in the Middle East. Instead of servicing coaches for Metro, the grandfather of nine was responsible for scheduling vehicles that moved 5,000 to 50,000 tons of material and 1,000 to 1,200 personnel, including diplomats, each day.

Those vehicles included tractor trailers, armored personnel vehicles, huge forklifts for loading and unloading the aircraft and 15-person passenger vans, which the 28-year Metro veteran sometimes drove.

Abeyta's first tour began in February 2005, and it found him at the Al Dhafra air base in the United Arab Emirates for 14 months.

His latest tour, which lasted seven months, found him loading and unloading giant U.S. Air Force cargo planes, such as C-17s, C-130s and C-5s.

"Any cargo coming into the base we moved," Abeyta said, still amazed at the size of the giant transports.

Even thousands of miles from Division 10, Abeyta found his Metro experience aided him in Kuwait.

"It helped me a lot in dealing with people [and] being able to diagnose problems with the vehicles we had," he explained. "We would work on the vehicles out there because we couldn't get a mechanic."

He found that the diesel engines and



Martin Abeyta, a mechanic "A" for Gateway Division 10, served two tours of duty at the Al Dhafra air base in the United Arab Emirates.

buses he serviced at Ali Al Salem faced similar rigors Metro vehicles face. "The same problems we have here, just [it's] a lot hotter over there," Abeyta said. Air conditioning systems and belts gave out frequently because of the heat, he added.

How hot was it?

Abeyta compares the heat at the air bases to Arizona's Lake Havasu in the summer—only 40 degrees hotter. He measured the heat at Ali Al Salem during his last tour. It was 145 degrees!



"You acclimate," he said, noting he and his colleagues drank water constantly and watched each other to make sure they were hydrated. Not so easy to acclimate to was the work load he faced as a dispatcher.

"We used to say that every day is Monday; that's what I used to tell my wife," Abeyta said. "You don't even care about . . . dates—one day just runs into the next."

Perhaps the dates flowed together because he was working an average of 12 to 16 hours per day, six or seven days a week, or because he found his role of dispatcher so mentally draining.

During his free time, besides watching movies, Abeyta learned Italian through an online course—a language his wife and daughter speak. He initially studied

Arabic, but he found it difficult to learn, in part because there are 200 dialects of the language.

Abeyta, who will rise to the rank of staff sergeant this month, does not believe he will be heading back to the Middle East, in part, because he now appears at personnel development conferences for the Air Force. In fact, he has just returned from a conference in Georgia. His colleagues now refer to him as a "poster child."

That would be good news for his nine grown children and his wife Lucy. "[It was] a big responsibility for her to take care of everything at home and still work."

In March 2008, Abeyta returned to the United States, and he returned to

work in June. He could have taken another month off, but he felt he was ready to return.

"This [tour] took a lot out of me," Abeyta said, recalling that he had trouble relaxing when he returned home.

Now, when he answers questions about his tours of duty from his grandsons, Abeyta thinks "it wasn't too bad."

One thing he doesn't miss is the sound of captured explosives being detonated at the outskirts of the Ali Al Salem air base. "It always seemed to happened on your day off," he said, adding that the first time he heard the explosion, it awakened him from a sound sleep.

Besides the care packages he received from co-workers at divisions 2 and 10, Abeyta valued his supervisors' understanding. "I really appreciated the support I received from Frank [Frank Lonyai] and all my supervisors and my co-workers," Abeyta said, particularly "Sending me off and welcoming me back."