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A long journey

Battalion commander escaped dictator in Uganda to pursue dreams in America

By VINCE LITTLE
vince.little@thebayonet.com

As a young boy growing up in Uganda, Joseph D'Costa became inspired by America's role in World War II and told his teacher he wanted to go to the U.S. Military Academy someday. "She laughed at me for my dream of going to West Point, telling me it would be impossible because I wasn't an American and Uganda had no ties to the U.S.," he recalled. "I still remember that to this day."

The 13th of 14 children raised by an Indian father and African mother, D'Costa was exiled to Austria at age 7 following Idi Amin's rise to power in 1971. Two years later, he came to the United States and ultimately got into West Point on a third and final attempt, earning his commission in 1989.

Now a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, he just completed a 10-month mobilization at Fort Benning as commander of 1st Battalion, 378th Infantry Regiment, a Lafayette, La.-based unit activated to augment basic combat training for the 192nd Infantry Brigade on Sand Hill.

"When we talk about the diversity of Soldiers across our Army, Lieutenant Colonel D'Costa's life story is one that tells a great story and serves as a motivational and inspiring example for our Soldiers, DoD civilians and the nation's civilian population," said Lt. Col. Roger O'Steen, the brigade's executive officer.

Shortly after Amin seized the Ugandan presidency in a military coup, D'Costa's mother fell ill with pneumonia-like symptoms. Because of her Protestant faith, however, she didn't get proper treatment as Amin decreed that anyone not a Muslim would get sent to the back of the line for health care. She died at 42.

"For me, it was very devastating, to realize the person I depended on so much was no longer there," said D'Costa, who was 6 at the time.

He said Amin then declared that anybody who wasn't 100 percent black had a choice: leave Uganda or face execution. D'Costa's father fled to India, a brother and sister got sent to Italy, and he took exile in Austria with five other siblings. Three stayed behind.

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JOHN D. HELMS

Wounded warriors highlight concerns

Army Wounded Warrior program invited more than 30 Soldiers to three-day forum to voice issues crucial to their reintegration and support.

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MCoE gets first Australian LNO

Move aimed at boosting collaboration on mutually beneficial maneuver issues

By VINCE LITTLE
vince.little@thebayonet.com

The Maneuver Center of Excellence has made a permanent splash Down Under.

Lt. Col. Michael "Mick" Ahern recently became the first Australian liaison officer assigned to Fort Benning. The close U.S. ally already had soldiers serving at the Maneuver Captains Career Course, but he'll act as the senior Australian Defence Force representative on post in a full range of official and community activities.

Ahern, who has a three-year assignment, arrived in late December from Sydney, where he was commander of the Australian Joint Proof and Experimental Unit. It's a key weapons and explosives ordnance test and evaluation agency for the Australian army, navy and air force.

He said he's taking a combined-arms approach to the role here and will work across the Armor and Infantry domains. In addition, he'll coordinate with the Fires Center of Excellence at Fort Sill, Okla.

"The United States is Australia's most important ally, and the U.S. Army is the benchmark for the Australian army," he said.

"The Australian army recognized the critical role that the U.S. Army's MCoE plays in developing future maneuver concepts, equipment, doctrine, and importantly training the current and future U.S. Army maneuver forces. It saw establishing an LNO post at the MCoE as the way forward to



VINCE LITTLE

Lt. Col. Michael "Mick" Ahern recently became the first Australian liaison officer assigned to Fort Benning.

develop collaboration opportunities between the U.S. and Australian armies on maneuver issues of mutual interest and benefit."

Ahern has served in the Australian army since 1989 in a range of field artillery branch appointments. As a forward observer and forward air controller, he's worked extensively with light infantry battalions and medium armor forces, helping direct joint fires in support of maneuver. He deployed to East Timor in 2000 with the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment.

Establishing relationships with MCoE staff » LNO, A10

Obama announces new initiative

Program | Designed to support military families

By JIAN DELEON
Emerging Media, Defense Media Activity

WASHINGTON — A new whole-of-government approach will bring the federal government's vast reach to help millions of service members and their families, a senior Defense Department official said.

"This is a very exciting time for those of us who have been working hard to support military families," Barbara Thompson, director of the Pentagon's office of family policy and children and youth, said during a "DODLive" bloggers roundtable.

Thompson said the backing of President Barack Obama, first lady Michelle Obama, and Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, behind the effort to garner the support of every federal agency "is really quite amazing."

For the past year, numerous federal agencies and the National Security Council have been working on a report, titled: "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting

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New benefits

VA includes a new automation system to speed up processing veteran and Soldier benefits in the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

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COMING UP, DON'T MISS ...

BASKETBALL: Faith hosts Arnold Magnet Academy. Feb. 9

WAX MUSEUM: Stowers Elementary class acts out history project. Feb. 9 »

STUDENT VETERANS: Columbus State University starts new club. Feb. 9



Wounded warriors relate top concerns to Army leadership

By J.D. LEIPOLD
ARNEWS

WASHINGTON — Concern about competitiveness among peers ranks top among the concerns for severely wounded, ill and injured Soldiers who have been allowed to continue to serve on active or active-Reserve duty.

More than 30 such Soldiers were invited by the Army Wounded Warrior Program to present their top concerns to Army leadership Thursday, during a Continue on Active Duty or Continue on Active Reserve forum in Alexandria, Va.

Across the Army, 250 Soldiers are on COAD/COAR status. As part of the forum, Soldiers

representing this community gathered to break down 57 issues their community feels are detrimental to the long-term reintegration and support of active wounded Soldiers — a segment of the Army which continues to grow according to the commander of the Warrior Transition Command.

“The Army is hosting this event to ensure that our existing policies keep pace with the needs of the rapidly growing population of COAD/COAR Soldiers,” Col. Darryl Williams said. “Since 2008, there has been a 23.3 percent increase in severely wounded Soldiers who continue to serve post injury. These Soldiers are

a tremendous asset, and I want to be sure we capitalize on their experience and support their long-term Army careers.”

Over the course of the three-day forum two focus groups identified their combined top 10 concerns which they then whittled down after subject matter experts had provided clarification on Army rules, regulations and policies.

The top issues the delegates presented to the review panel included:

- A review on how to make COAD/COAR Soldiers competitive with peers for promotion though they will be unable to perform in combat roles as non-COAD/COAR Soldiers.

- A standardization on awareness and understanding of COAD/COAR Soldiers at all levels of the Army.

- Procurement, sustainment and maintenance of durable medical and adaptive fitness equipment such as wheelchairs and prosthetics.

- Better coordination of care for COAD/COAR Soldiers.

- Establishment of a stipend for extra expenses directly associated with service-related injuries.

- Development of an advanced education program for enlisted COAD/COAR Soldiers.

Panel members will take the proposals to Army senior leadership to be considered

for implementation. The panel included: Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostic, Army G-1; Maj. Gen. Gina S. Farrisee, Human Resource commander; Brig. Gen. Gary H. Cheek, Military Personnel Management director; Col. Gregory Gadson, AW2 director and Col. Darryl A. Williams, WTC commander.

Since the late 1960s, the Army has had regulations on the books that allow Soldiers found unfit for duty by the Physical Evaluation Board due to severe combat wounds such as amputations, paralysis, severe burns, post-traumatic stress disorder and loss of vision to serve under COAD or COAR status.

Journey | From A1

“I was half, so I was considered impure and had to leave,” he said. “Here’s a black man saying, ‘You are not the perfect race.’ When you experience racism from your own race ... I was not expecting that.”

“Idi Amin was killing so many innocent people when they weren’t leaving the country fast enough. Books were burned. Even educated blacks got killed because they were considered threats to Amin.”

The “Butcher of Uganda,” as he became known, ruled over the nation for eight years. The number of opponents who were killed, tortured or imprisoned varies from 100,000 to half a million, according to biographical accounts. The dictator was ousted in 1979 by Ugandan nationalists, after which he fled into exile.

In Austria, a Catholic priest looked after D’Costa, who spoke Swahili in Uganda and never learned English. In time, he was taught German.

D’Costa said he told the priest

about his desire to attend West Point. The priest was a friend of then-U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, who arranged for 9-year-old D’Costa and several siblings to come to the United States. He went to live with an older brother in Englewood, N.J.

After graduating high school in 1983, D’Costa applied to West Point but got turned down.

“They said I’m not American and don’t speak English well enough, the very thing that teacher was telling me would happen,” he said.

So he joined the Army ROTC cadet corps at Providence College. Following his freshman year, the department head offered him a full scholarship, but he’d have to abandon his West Point dream and remain at Providence.

“It would’ve been the easy way out,” he said, “but I needed to know how far I was willing to commit. I had given up on that, but (the ROTC department head) said, ‘If West Point is in your heart, you need to apply again.’”

D’Costa submitted a second application, but West Point was

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— Lt. Col. Joseph D’Costa
1st Battalion, 378th Infantry Regiment

already at its 1,500-cadet limit, so he had to go to the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School at Fort Monmouth, N.J., for a year and then apply again. If turned down, he would’ve been too old for another shot, but was finally accepted and became a 21-year-old “plebe.”

He served in the Gulf War as a field artillery officer. D’Costa left the Army in 1994 but joined the Reserve two years later. Since then, he’s deployed twice to Iraq, once to Afghanistan, and supported military relief missions following Hurricane Katrina and the Pakistan earthquake.

D’Costa has been the 1st Battalion, 378th Infantry Regiment commander since 2008. A change

of command ceremony takes place March 12 in Lafayette. He’s set to leave Fort Benning on Feb. 11.

“I credit every success I’ve had to my faith in Jesus Christ, because I shouldn’t be alive today. My life should’ve ended in Uganda,” he said. “All these people I encountered along the way were put into my life to help me reach my goals. ... I never looked at my skin color as a reason I did not get to West Point at first. They were looking for certain qualities and tools I needed to learn.”

D’Costa will return to work in the private sector, but he’s expected to graduate from the U.S. Army War College by July. From there, he’ll learn if the Army has any further plans for him.

The lieutenant colonel praised the U.S. military for preserving freedom around the globe and said he stays in the Army Reserve as a token of his appreciation.

“The United States could’ve said ‘no’ to me,” he said. “Putting my life on the line for a country that took me in is a small price to pay. ... Freedom is so priceless, and all I have to do is serve in the reserves to continue saying ‘thank you.’ Until the Army tells me to get out, I’ll stay.”

“This is the greatest country in the world. When I say that, I’m not just saying it because I heard it from somebody else. ... The majority of Americans don’t know what it’s like when you have no freedom.”

D’Costa ultimately hopes to work for NASA. In the late 1990s, he spent two years with the agency in a liaison role for Enron.

“West Point seemed like an impossible goal ... but I kept pursuing that goal till I made it happen,” he said. “You can achieve anything you want — you just have to put a little effort into it.”

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