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The Martha's Vineyard TIMES

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May 20 - May 26, 2004 Edition
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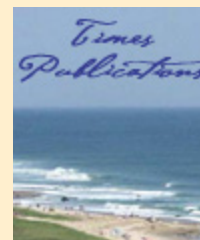
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Air Force reservists build new center for Wampanoags

May 20, 2004

By Nelson Sigelman

Far from their home base of Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, a team of Air Force reservists began work early Monday morning building a new community center for the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah. The 6,500-square-foot structure is expected to be up and significantly completed in six weeks.

The reservists traveled to Martha's Vineyard to work on the tribal project as part of the Air Reserve Command Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program. Three separate teams of reservists will work on the building as part of a civil engineering training exercise.

The troops may get the opportunity to train on Martha's Vineyard again next year as well. The Tribe has requested IRT program assistance to erect an almost identical building in the same area for use as a medical clinic.

That request has already been processed and is contingent on funding.

Last month, the tribe self-permitted the new community center it is now building on tribal property. Standing on a Superior Court ruling that is currently under appeal to the state Supreme Court, the tribe did not seek review or approval from town boards or the Martha's Vineyard Commission.

The new community center will include a gymnasium, kitchen facilities and meeting space.

In a telephone interview from Air Force Reserve Command Headquarters at Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins Georgia, Chief Master Sergeant Gill Taylor spoke about the program prior to his departure for Martha's Vineyard. Chief Taylor said the IRT program is a Department of Defense program designed to allow the military to assist local communities and receive valuable hands-on experience.

"It's all about training," said Sergeant Taylor. "That is what this program is all about."

Three squadrons of approximately 20 reservists in civil engineering groups will work on the project over the next six weeks.

Members of the 507th civil engineering squadron started arriving Saturday from Tinker Air Force Base for a two-week tour. That group will be replaced by another group of 507th reservists. The last squadron to work on the project will arrive from the 908th civil engineering squadron part of the Air Lift Wing based in Maxwell Airforce Base in Montgomery, Alabama.

The reservists will get to experience an Island commute, complete with mopeds and deer. While on-Island, the team members are staying at the Island Inn in Oak Bluffs.

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Under the IRT program, the Air Force supplies the labor and tools. The tribe supplies the materials.

The Air Force is not the only federal entity lending a helping hand. The US Department of Housing and Urban development is providing a \$500,000 grant for the project. The Bureau of Indian Affairs is providing another \$200,000 for road work, according to a published report in the Vineyard Gazette.

Chief Taylor said that any nonprofit organization may apply to the IRT program, and that the application process is not particularly competitive. The main judgment in deciding on a project, he said, is its potential as a training opportunity for the troops. Chief Taylor said the IRT does a great deal of work with Native American tribes.

As an example, he said the reservists annually build houses for the Navajo Tribe in Gallup, New Mexico. "That's a big project and good training for our troops as well," he said.

Chief Taylor was contacted by the Wampanoag tribe three years ago. Following a site visit and review of the plans, it was decided the community center met all of the IRT training criteria, including the use of horizontal and vertical building skills, heavy machinery, and electrical and plumbing work on a pre-engineered structure. These are skills the units are called upon to use both in this country and overseas.

The opportunity to visit Martha's Vineyard was an added bonus. From the perspective of the troops, "who wouldn't want to go to Martha's Vineyard," said Sergeant Taylor.

Asked what the whole package costs, Sergeant Taylor said, "I am not at liberty to say, but I can tell you it is not cheap."

He said, "Again, training is the issue."

By the time the Air Force units leave, the plan is to have the building up and much of the rough interior work — including the plumbing, heating, and electrical — completed.

Last week the unit's tools were flown in to Westover Air Force base in western Massachusetts. The slab for the building had already been poured in place by a private contractor working for the Tribe.

Sergeant Taylor said everything must line up correctly for the building to go up smoothly, and that the tribe has assured him everything is on schedule "Since we only have six weeks we don't want any holdups. We need to hit the ground running," he said.

This week the troops got down to business. Speaking from the Island Inn on Monday evening, a few days after his arrival, Chief Taylor said the first day of work was spent arranging the building components in preparation for construction work Tuesday.

With the project under way, on Tuesday, Chief Taylor left for Washington, D.C. Prior to his departure, he said the troops had been warmly welcomed by the Island, with some businesses extending discounts.

"The people of Martha's Vineyard have just been wonderful," he said. "The troops are more than happy."



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