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Owens and NeSmith - Combat Cousins at COB Speicher

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TIKRIT, Iraq - With COB Speicher being one of the coalition's largest contingency operation bases in-theater, the chances of running into your cousin at the Post Exchange are slim. But, that's how these two cousins finally found each other last December.

"I got a couple of e-mails from another cousin and an aunt asking if I've seen her yet," said Spc. Jeremie NeSmith, a cable installer and systems maintenance specialist with Charlie Company, Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne on his second tour in Iraq. He arrived in theater in August 2006.

"Nikki and I had talked to each other but couldn't seem to figure out where the other one was located on Speicher. Then, one day I was in the PX, I did a double-take, and there she was," NeSmith said.

Kele "Nikki" Owens is a Department of Army civilian with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District, Savannah, Ga. She is on a six-month tour here with the Gulf Region North District, where she is a command administrative assistant. Owens arrived here in October, four months behind her cousin.

"We knew we were both on Speicher but we didn't know we were right next door to each other," Owens said. In an environment where everything is behind 10-foot, concrete T-walls, there is no clear view of other organizations - and very few signs announcing who's behind those T-



Combat cousins Spc. Jeremie NeSmith, Company C, Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civilian Kele "Nikki" Owens, Gulf Region North district, spent several months together at Contingency Operating Base Speicher in Iraq. [USACE Photo]

wall. It operational security, you have to already know where you're going."

NeSmith and Owens' hometowns are Jacksonville, Fla., and Pooler, Ga., respectively. Their grandmothers are sisters; the late Rosemary NeSmith of Jacksonville, who passed in 1992; and Ethel L. Mumford, currently a resident of Pooler, Ga.

"I left home the day after Thanksgiving," Owens said. "It was hard for me. I had never been away from my family...and certainly had never been out of the country before this tour. And it's been wonderful being here with Jeremie because he's family. We spent Christmas and New Year's together. And, we're learning a lot

about each other.”

NeSmith explained that his dad was a coach and his family was heavily involved in sports when he was growing up in Jacksonville. “So, we didn’t travel a lot. Nikki and I didn’t really know each other too well because we didn’t see each other very often.”

Owens added, “I’m older than Jeremie, so I can tell him things about the family that he doesn’t know. We’ve learned a lot about each other...and we’ve learned a lot together from being here and focusing on the same goal - building relationships.”

The combat cousins agree; they feel they’re doing something special together.

“We [troops] have been given a mission and we’ll complete it,” NeSmith said. “The Iraqi people need us and we need the American people’s support...or our country will be divided.” He added that he feels the Iraqi people want the same freedom and democracy Americans enjoy.

Owens echoed that sentiment, “This has made me appreciate choices...our freedom to make choices. We focus on material things. But to the Iraqi people, water and electricity are precious...and food.”

They both agreed that the Coalition’s mission here is about building relationships - countries becoming friends, thereby enabling the Iraqi people to rebuild and grow after almost 40 years of neglect and oppression; to become self-sufficient and to develop the capacity to sustain their new independence for generations to come.

“This experience is bringing our families closer together, too,” Owens added. She has ten sisters, a son and daughter. Ne-Smith has two sisters and a deceased brother.



[USACE Photo]

“If my son wasn’t graduating from high school next month,” Owens said, “I would probably request an extension. This was truly a good experience for me. I’ve learned so much about myself...you grow over here.”

“Yes,” NeSmith added. “You grow mentally and spiritually. God sent me here a second time to learn something. I hope I’ve learned it.”

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