

USO Plays a Critical Role at the Dover Air Force Base

The USO, or United Service Organizations, was created in the 1940s to provide support to the brave Americans fighting to save the world from Hitler's Third Reich and Japanese Imperialism. The USO's mission to serve the troops continues today across the globe, including important work at the Dover Air Force Base in Kent County.

The USO operates a special lounge at the Air Passenger Terminal, where service members and their families can grab a cup of coffee, a bite to eat and relax in between flights. The USO has just three full-time staff members in Dover, so volunteers play a critical role in meeting the needs of those who are serving our country.

"The volunteers love it, especially for the redeploying troops. They really want to hug every single troop that comes in. A lot of them are retired," said Bill Flanders, the Center's Operations Supervisor.

The Center has video games, a pool table, a computer room, a theater and plenty of comfy couches and chairs. Center Director Bruce Kmiec said nearly 25,000 people visited the center last year. "Before you walk out the door you could have 150 people coming off the plane. We have the heavy planes here [C-5s and C-17s], three of them could land and it could be elbow to elbow in here," said Kmiec.

Kay Powers has been volunteering for the USO for 19 years. "The stories you get through the years are pretty wild. Of course, I heard them growing up, my Dad fought in World War One. I've just been here a long time. It's just part of my life," she said.

Local businesses and community groups play a role in making sure food is available to servicemen and women. In 2014, the Girl Scouts donated 1,047 cases of cookies—that's more than 12,000 boxes.

The USO also runs a similar center at the mortuary located on the south side of the base, where members of the Armed Forces who paid the ultimate price are taken.

USO volunteers and staff provide food and comfort to families of the fallen. Volunteers also assist families of the fallen with travel accommodations to ensure they are able to be present for what's called a dignified transfer, when a fallen serviceman or woman's remains are transported from an aircraft to the mortuary.

During a family's darkest hours, USO volunteers work to make the emotional process as easy as possible.

"That's one thing about our volunteers. They are all very passionate about what they do and they're all very passionate about supporting the troops and their families," said Yolanda Bottorf, a USO staffer. For more information on the USO, please visit www.uso.org/donatedelaware.