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Patrick assures Army civilians about future of jobs, Fort Sam Houston

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With several major events occurring at Fort Sam Houston last week – the activation of the 502nd Mission Support Group, the change of command at the Army Medical Department Center & School and the senior command of the post transferring to Army North – some Department of the Army civilian workers may be wondering what the future holds for them.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Leonard Patrick, commander of the 502nd Air Base Wing, spent time with a standing room only crowd of Army civilians April 29 to assure them that things will stay pretty much the way they are now, just with a few name changes.



“We are a team,” Patrick said to the people assembled at the post’s Evans Theater. “It doesn’t matter what uniform you wear.”

The 502nd MSG now serves most of the same functions the Army Garrison does, and there are similar units at Lackland (802nd MSG) and Randolph (902nd MSG) that are the mechanisms that keep Joint Base San Antonio rolling.

“The garrison was reorganized into a mission support group,” Patrick said. “Col. Mary Garr is now dual-hatted, as she is garrison commander, carrying the garrison flag, and also 502nd MSG commander, carrying a 502nd MSG flag.”

Patrick became the 502nd ABW commander last year after being in charge of the 37th Training Wing at Lackland Air Force Base.

“Every civilian that works for the garrison is still Army. On Oct. 1, you’ll change your CAC (computer access cards) and become Air Force civilians,” Patrick said. “Trust me, throughout all the joint bases, for every civilian, this is an emotional event. I want to take away some of the angst from that.”

With the Oct. 1 transfer, the Air Force won't own Fort Sam Houston, but it will operate it, Patrick explained. The 502nd ABW is responsible for supporting a total of 211 diverse mission partners throughout Joint Base San Antonio installations.

"Your job should not change, whether you work for what's now called security forces or the civil engineering squadron or the force support squadron," Patrick assured the assembled civilian workers. "There will be growing pains. Trust me, when I put Lackland and Randolph together, the cultures for the training and flying worlds were as different to each other as the differences between the Air Force and Navy.

"It's going to take time. I'm not going to come in and say, 'It's going to be this way,'" the general said. "We'll have to figure out how to keep the Army identity with the Air Force nomenclature."

Patrick said that one positive coming from joint basing is the ability to take a practice that works at one installation and make it work at all three.

"If there's an issue going on, I want to be able to take the best minds from the bases to solve the problem. I don't want to re-invent the wheel, I want to steal the best idea and have everyone use it," Patrick said. "If it takes 45 minutes to an hour to get a CAC card at one place and it takes 15 minutes at another, we're figure out how to make it 15 minutes everywhere.

"Some things will remain Army. We're standing up the Army Support Activity that will do some mission stuff and we're figuring out how to interact with them," the general said. "They're not a mini-garrison or mini-mission support group."

Patrick also talked about the meteoric growth Joint Base San Antonio is experiencing, especially at and around Fort Sam Houston. He related that the 502nd ABW is gaining about 190 new positions and more job growth is expected as a result of BRAC moves.

"All the military installations in San Antonio are growing. We train about 140,000 people a year, not only here, but on Lackland and Randolph AFBs as well," he said. "We going to support a military community of about 80,000 DoD civilians and military members. This is a huge operation.

"I've been asked, 'How am I going to operate all that?'" Patrick said about overseeing the two Air Force bases and one Army post, along with all their satellite locations. "Col. Garr is still going to be the face for Fort Sam Houston for day-to-day operations. I've got colonels at Randolph and Lackland that will be the face for the day-to-day operations at those bases. My staff and I will set the policy and give them resources. If Colonel Garr or the other colonels need me, that's when I'll go put together a meeting with them."

In addressing the fact that none of the three installations actually share a fence line, Patrick also shared his appreciation for the breadth of Fort Sam Houston's military history.

"I live and work on Fort Sam Houston. After we activated the 502nd ABW, I moved into Staff Post #9," the general said. "I've lived and worked in San Antonio since 1999 and been around joint basing for a while, but it wasn't until I moved onto Fort Sam Houston that I got the full scope of the military history here.

“You celebrated the 100th anniversary of military flight by Lt. Benjamin Foulois here recently. He was an Army aviator, not Air Force. The house he lived in is right next door to where I live today,” Patrick related. “A couple of doors down from that is Gen. Blackjack Pershing’s house, who chased Pancho Villa along the border. Down from there is Arthur MacArthur’s house, where a young Douglas stuck his tongue out at the workers while they were working on the house – two Medal of Honor winners living in the same house!

“Staff Post #13 is where Billy Mitchell lived, who got court-martialed for saying we should have a separate service. Geronimo was in the clock tower after we captured him. Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders trained here,” the general said. “I didn’t know any of that until I moved here. When I tell Air Force officers about this, they are floored by what Fort Sam Houston means to our military.

“Many people have worked very hard to get to this point,” the general said. “There are powerful opportunities here and what we look like today may not be what we look like in the future. These are truly exciting times.”