



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

November 9, 2021

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Jim Whaley, Regional President, USO Southeast

By Rick Handford

Fred Brown resisted his impulse to call the room to "Attention!" and opted to ask veterans present to stand and be recognized. When the applause died down, Fred proceeded to introduce our speaker, Jim Whaley, the regional president of USO Southeast. From his Fort Mill office, he is responsible for USO operations and fund development in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, and the southern half of Virginia.

Whaley is a former vice president of global corporate communications and government affairs at Charlotte-based Sealed Air Corporation. But he spent 20 years in the military and retired from the US Army as a lieutenant colonel. He was a Master Army aviator and a helicopter instructor pilot. He holds the Legion of Merit, Air Assault Badge, and the Humanitarian Service Medal.

The USO, or United Service Organizations, is known for entertaining troops worldwide (Fred had fond memories of Ann-Margret and Bob Hope), but it does much more. Whaley says USO concerns itself much more with caring for service members as well as connecting them to their families, homes, and the country.

Jim thanked the Rotary Club for inviting him and for its great work in the community, and disclosed that he had been president of the Rotary Club in West Point, NY for two years. The Southeast Region is by far the largest in the USO, and is home to the oldest USO (founded in 1941), located in Jacksonville, NC, home of the Camp Lejeune Marine training base. The Charlotte airport is one of the largest in the world in terms of the number of military personnel served each year.

While the USO has a presence in 15 countries on 7 continents, 33.2% of the

nation's active-duty military, 30% of National Guard and Reserve forces, and 535 thousand military dependents, are served by the Southeast Region through its 58 locations. During this holiday season, some 10,000 young soldiers from Fort Jackson, SC, will be passing through the Charlotte Airport on their way home for the holidays, some having never been through an airport before. The USO's 300 CLT volunteers will be there to see that they are given places to wait, food and drink, and guidance through the airport to make sure that they get onto the right plane at the right time.

The USO is involved with supporting military members and their families at every step of the process, from enlistment through training to deployment and back to the transition into civilian life. The USO's mission is to keep the military strong by keeping its soldiers and sailors connected to family, home, and country throughout their service to the nation. To accomplish this, they provide services throughout the world wherever we have soldiers and/or dependents, facilitating communication (both phone and video chats) between those deployed and their families back home; supporting spouses and children through social events, family strengthening workshops, spouse networking, kid's activities and more. Virtual story time, where a soldier is videoed reading a book to his/her children that can be played back at home while the parent is away, is a particularly useful way to maintain a connection.

In the field, the USO provides places for soldiers to rest and enjoy recreational activities, including computer gaming and sports activities, care packages, refreshments, and most importantly providing appreciation for the sacrifices they are making for their country. When their duty is complete, the USO Pathfinder program provides transition assistance, including planning for a career, how to acquire the training/education required, how to dress for and behave during interviews, and connecting them with local resources and networks where they decide to settle.

Jim noted that the force of today includes many more families as opposed to unmarried individuals living in the barracks as used to be the case. He has no studies to prove this, but he believes that this is caused by the fact that many choose to enlist later in life, which means that they have a better chance of being married, and also that the military benefits package, especially family medical care, is attractive compared to many civilian opportunities. Surprisingly, despite the stresses of separation and the dangers of the job, the incidence of divorce among military couples is lower than it is in the civilian population. I would submit that support from the USO is one of the drivers for this statistic.

If you wish to support the USO in its mission, go to [USO.org](https://usos.org) to donate or to find volunteer opportunities.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/644083047>
Jim Whaley's introduction begins at 17:35 minutes.