

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3812

BRAC Commission

August 12, 2005

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Received

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi, Chairman
Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission
2521 South Clark Street Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Chairman Principi:

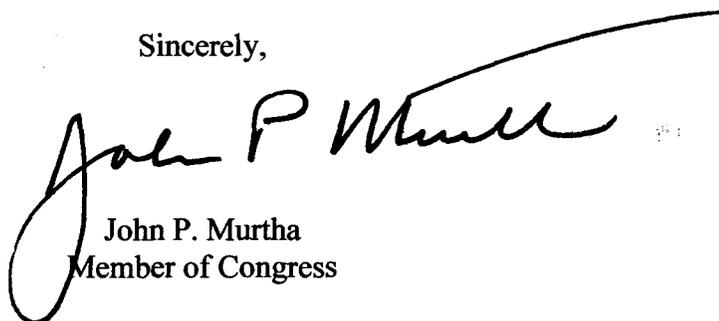
I am writing to explain why I believe it would be a mistake to relocate the Marine Corps HMLA-775 Det. A from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey. **Within 40 miles of Johnstown, there were nearly 50,000 veterans in the 2000 Census, demonstrating that this area has a tradition of service, a tradition of volunteering, a tradition of values that are so important to our district and our nation. The Johnstown area was recently recognized as the most deployed city in Pennsylvania.**

We have worked for years to attract a regular military organization that could provide joint training and operations with our strong Pennsylvania National Guard. **The fact that the HMLA-775 Det. A has twice been deployed directly into combat areas, without first going for additional training, clearly demonstrates that this unit holds all of the pieces needed for success – the equipment, the modern training facility, the joint training opportunities, and the ability to recruit and retain top caliber personnel.**

The United States Government recently spent \$14 million to build the country's most modern aviation facility to support this unit in Johnstown. The Marines here will tell you they are extremely proud of their accomplishments, and that their training, facilities and readiness are the best. It is essential that we maintain this proven formula for success.

I have enclosed a more detailed assessment and I recommend for your consideration to keep the HMLA-775 Det. A based in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,



John P. Murtha
Member of Congress

JPM/bc
enclosure

TO: The Honorable Anthony J. Principi, Chairman
FROM: The Honorable John P. Murtha, Member of Congress
RE: Assessment of HMLA-775 Det. A, Johnstown, Pennsylvania
DATE: August 12, 2005

Briefly, I believe that moving this unit from Johnstown would:

- Jeopardize the unit's proven high state of readiness by moving it from a new facility with plenty of space to one that likely will have insufficient space when KC-135s are not retired.
- Jeopardize the unit's proven high state of readiness by moving it from an area with no air congestion, encroachment or other major operational problems to a facility that has airspace, encroachment and other issues.
- Jeopardize morale by moving the unit from a low-cost area with outstanding quality of life and tremendous community support to a congested, high-cost, metropolitan area.

Please let me elaborate.

First, it is not clear that McGuire will have the capacity for this and other units proposed for transfer there from Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. The BRAC report indicated that McGuire would have additional capacity with the retirement of 16 KC-135Es. However, legislative language requires older C-130s and KC-135s to be retained. We in Congress recognize how critical it is to maintain adequate airlift capacity, and I can tell you, there will not be retirements of KC-135s. Therefore, McGuire will not have the anticipated capacity.

It would especially be a mistake to relocate the HMLA-775 Det. A to an inadequate facility when it currently is housed in one of the most modern facilities in the country. The new, \$14 million Marine Corps Reserves Training Center was dedicated in Johnstown on December 3, 2000, and meets every operational requirement. In addition, the Navy has no maintenance responsibility for the ramps or runways at the Johnstown airport.

Second, let's look at the operational and training capabilities of Johnstown vs. McGuire. The HMLA-775 Det. A regularly participates in true joint operations with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard and the Pennsylvania Air National Guard. These joint operations were not considered in the initial BRAC assessment. Perhaps most telling is the fact that HMLA-775 Det. A has been deployed directly to Iraq twice – they were not sent anywhere for further training, they were put on a plane and sent directly to Iraq. This is a testimony to their state of readiness, and clear evidence that they have a successful formula that is an asset to our military.

In addition, it is essential to consider the operational issues involved with crowded air space. The McGuire area already has crowded airspace, and bringing in more air units will only worsen the problem. Air traffic is so congested that an alert area (A-220) is now active daily

from 0800 to 2200 hours from the surface to 4500 feet. Opportunities for new training that exist on paper may be difficult to implement. In a related concern, the McGuire military complex has serious encroachment problems. These encroachments raise concerns not only about the safety of the general public if an accident should occur, but also raise serious concerns about security.

Now contrast these conditions with Johnstown. Johnstown has all the safety features in place to work in all types of weather. The Pennsylvania Air National Guard's 258th Air Traffic Control Squadron based there provides air-traffic services to both military and civilian aircraft. In addition, Johnstown was among the first five facilities in the world to receive the latest radar equipment, Digital Airport Surveillance Radar. This system has been installed and will soon be operational at Johnstown. Johnstown airport has no airspace congestion and land encroachment issues, so security is excellent. Evidence of the ability to fly routinely at Johnstown is clear from the fact that the HMLA increased its flying hours almost 30 percent from 2001 to 2004 – and then it deployed directly to combat in a state of full operational readiness.

The BRAC report also noted that Johnstown had no firing range. But the report failed to note that McGuire's firing range has been shut down (and likely can't reopen because of encroachment and surrounding high-density population areas); Johnstown is closer to the ranges at either Fort Indiantown Gap or Quantico and is a similar distance from the Camp Lejeune range; and Johnstown is an Ammo Supply Point, so crews can depart here loaded and ready as they fly directly to the range. Likewise, although Johnstown has no shipboard training, the units also would need to travel from McGuire to accomplish this training.

Third, let's look at administrative and troop-support issues. HMLA-775 Det. A has functioned effectively as a detachment and would gain no operational advantage from co-locating with its administrative headquarters. Any cost savings from co-locating the administrative functions would be more than offset by the many other costs, which are lower at Johnstown than at McGuire. As noted, ramp and runway maintenance is handled by the local airport in Johnstown. The unit in Johnstown has handled intermediate maintenance efficiently using Standard Operating Procedures and Logistics procedures. Although Johnstown has no barracks, it does now have transient quarters available for Marines who are locating to Johnstown for up to six months, which is more than enough time for them to find local housing. Housing in the Johnstown area is significantly lower than housing in major urban areas. Enlisted BAH at Johnstown is \$655 per month, much lower than the \$1,348 Enlisted BAH at McGuire. This dramatic difference in housing costs is indicative of the cost savings available in general in the smaller market area of Johnstown compared with the large urban metropolis surrounding McGuire. In addition to the low cost of living, the Johnstown area has many other quality-of-life advantages, including exceptional outdoor opportunities for skiing, mountain bicycling, fishing, swimming, golfing, hiking and camping. Several institutions of higher learning offer excellent educational opportunities, including the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, Saint Francis University, Mount Aloysius College and Penn Highlands Community College. And the community itself is an asset to the military personnel because of the high level of support, including the support that the local Veterans Leadership Program has provided to families of deployed Marines. These qualities of life are so important that we have had Marines and other military personnel specifically request transfer to Johnstown with the intention of remaining here after retirement from the military.

Mr. Chairman, I have also been concerned that the BRAC will hurt retention and recruitment. I am gravely concerned that we will not be able to sustain our current efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan because of our declining rates of enlistment and retention. Our military personnel have been over-deployed and clearly this affects morale, retention and enlistment throughout the nation. But Pennsylvania in general and Southwestern Pennsylvania in particular have a long history of support for our military. According to the 2000 Census, Pennsylvania's 12th Congressional District had 77,884 veterans, and with 40 miles of Johnstown, there were nearly 50,000 veterans. Clearly this area has a tradition of service, a tradition of volunteering, a tradition of values that support our nation. That tradition continues as the Pennsylvania National Guard is the most deployed Guard in the nation and Johnstown, Pennsylvania has been recognized as the most deployed city in the state with over 500 soldiers, seamen, airmen and Marines deployed. Recruitment and retention will decline unless we maintain a strong military presence in areas that have a history of supporting our military, areas that typically have close-knit families and neighborhoods that people call "home" and refuse to move away.

Finally, let me highlight the effective joint operations of this HMLA Det. The unit regularly participates in truly joint operations with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard and Air National Guard, and these joint operations have paid off during combat deployments. As noted, this unit has twice been deployed directly to combat without further training, so it is clear that they have achieved the goal of being able to operate in a joint arena. Our active forces cannot succeed without strong support from Guard and Reserves, and this unit has demonstrated that it holds all of the pieces needed for success – the equipment, the modern training facility, and the ability to recruit and retain personnel of the top caliber, personnel who can deploy quickly and directly into combat.

Mr. Principi, that's why we feel strongly that relocating the HMLA-775 Det. A out of Johnstown would be a mistake and top priority should be given to keeping this unit at its present location.