

Networking site for troops also can help families

BY CHRIS FOWLER
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE — After the Department of Defense's ban on MySpace and other select Web sites, the social networking site TogetherWeServed.com's existence has become a proverbial elephant standing in the corner of the room.

But instead of everyone ignoring it, they are taking turns riding it.

Users create profiles that visually display their careers like a virtual shadow box that has each item cross-referenced with every other person who has that same item.

TWS editor and former Navy journalist John Yim said the site "is specifically designed to be a common thread to link many servicemembers together under a single banner."

The popularity among servicemembers is rapidly expanding.

Since TWS commissioned its Navy site Oct. 27, 2006, it has accrued more than 188,000 members.

People have a choice of joining either a Marine Corps-specific or Navy-specific site. Individual Web sites for the Army, Air Force and Coast Guard are currently being designed.

The site connects like-minded people by limiting its membership to servicemembers, both former and active, and their spouses.

"The firewalls on my ship don't block TWS," wrote Petty Officer 2nd Class Anne Jelinek, an operations specialist aboard USS George Washington, in an e-mail explaining that she and her husband now communicate through the site when she's at sea.

Petty Officer 1st Class Rachael Wolfe, an intelligence specialist who is among a few sailors serving at a joint command in Stuttgart, Germany, said she uses TWS to stay on top of Navy-specific things.

"I can use the site to ask for other peoples' experiences, where to look for info/instructions and MANY other topics. It makes life much easier here in the land of the Army," she said.

The site provides forums to tackle a range of subjects, from domestic issues to day-to-day questions and mentoring. Servicemembers around the world are using the site to meet each other, find old friends or just talk.

"This site alone has solved many problems and or questions that I have had regarding my career, and life in general," wrote Petty Officer 1st Class Robert Scaife, a quartermaster stationed at Sealift Logistics Command, Atlantic, in a response through TWS. "It is a great tool, not to mention it is like a virtual goat locker, with the wealth of knowledge being passed around up and down the ranks."

And through generations of servicemembers.

"We have 18-year-old servicemembers who are serving as individual augmentees going online and chatting with 80-year-old veterans," said retired Marine Master Sgt. Joe Armstrong, the site's senior military administrator. "The only thing they have in common is military camaraderie, but by sharing their experiences with one another, they are building a living history."

And through these experiences, Armstrong said TWS has affected thousands of lives.

"There were a couple of guys who joined the military under the buddy system during Vietnam," said Armstrong, adding that after their first tour, one went to officer candidate school and never heard from his friend again.

"After 40 years, this retired officer logs onto TWS and finds a memorial that the family of his lost friend had set up on the site," Armstrong said. The lost friend was killed in action.

TWS helped the family and the retired officer get in contact, Armstrong said.

"(TWS) admin received an e-mail from a member who feared for the life of another as possible suicidal," wrote Loyde McMillan, a former petty officer 2nd class. "(TWS) verified that both parties were NTWS members, and were able to contact the chief on watch at the member's command."

Another incident occurred when the widow of a Vietnam vet logged onto TWS to post a memorial of her late husband. He was killed in action when she was 18.

"She didn't want anything to do with the military after the death of her husband," Armstrong said. "After all these years, she went to TWS so her husband's legacy would not be lost."

But after she began working with the site's administrators to build a profile, Armstrong said they discovered she never received an ID card or many other benefits.

"We helped her through the process," Armstrong said. "Now this 65-year-old woman is getting health care through Tricare for life."

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U.S. NAVY
185548 Navy Profiles
622 Members Online

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The opening page to log on to <http://navy.togetherweserved.com>.

Posers need not apply – screening eliminates persistent impersonators

Not everyone is welcome at TogetherWeServed.com — especially one particular kind of person.

"I call them posers," said retired Marine Master Sgt. Joe Armstrong, the site's senior military administrator. "They are users who log onto the site and pretend to be someone who they are not, and I don't put up that kind of thing."

Armstrong said that because the entire staff of administrators has a military background, they are all on the lookout for people faking it.

If they find someone who doesn't appear to belong, administrators will confront that person about the discrepancy, he said.

"I would say we pick up on most posers within about 24-36 hours of them creating a profile," said Armstrong. "Usually, once they are confronted, they

exit and we kill their profile, but sometimes we will find persistent posers."

According to Armstrong, a persistent poser is someone who insists that they are someone they are not. These are people who, for reasons unknown, have done a little homework and decide to bask in the glow of a career never served.

Armstrong listed a handful of "tells," indicators that someone might not be who they say they are. But to prevent the problem from growing, Stars and Stripes was asked not to list them.

"I know of a couple people who are now serving time as guests of the state for being posers," Armstrong said, adding that it is against the law to wear military medals and claim them as your own. "We all are on the constant look for posers, and when we find them, we bust them."

— Chris Fowler

Easy to keep in touch with Navy buddies

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE — The official military blackout of "social" network Web sites was less than one week old when a Navy buddy, Paul, e-mailed me about TogetherWeServed.com.

"It's pretty amazing," he wrote. "I've been able to find and contact dozens of friends, and the DOD doesn't have it blocked off to military computers!"

I Googled the site. I clicked on the link and was given the choice of joining either a Marine Corps-specific or Navy-specific site.

I clicked on Navy and logged on with a free trial membership.

From the home page, I was prompted to create a profile. I was given the option of providing as much detail as I wanted. I put a couple of pictures, my military history and my ribbon bar.

It was very easy to do and it took me less than 30 minutes.

Each former command I listed caused the logo of that command to appear.

The logos were shown sequentially, and by clicking on a logo, the site told me how many other users also had served at that command.

I clicked on the number, and began scanning the list of names looking for people I served with.

When I found someone's name I recognized, I clicked on it and the site sent me to their profile.

From there I could see their pictures and where they had served. And there was a place to drop them a note. I've been on the site every day since. I blame it on Paul.

— Chris Fowler

Clarification

A story in Friday editions should have said the Navy plans to put 155 mm Advanced Gun Weapons Systems on the new DDG-1000 ships.

Why do we have to pay?

The first question many people ask when exploring TogetherWeServed.com is why the site charges for membership, said Art Gazelle, a retired chief petty officer and link manager for the site.

"The site has no advertisements, no pop-ups and we don't sell our membership lists," Gazelle said.

"The site is paid for by the membership dues, but if you look at the prices, they are next to nothing."

- one year full membership: \$20.00
- three years full membership: \$45.00
- lifetime full membership: \$125.00

Free membership deal

New users get a free one-month membership, and can extend that by recruiting others. Users who get five others to sign up earn another six months of full membership free.

— Chris Fowler