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Base community 'lives it up' at new FOX Sports Sky Box

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SOUTHWEST ASIA - Deployed military members gathered in the spot of the former Desert Eagle Lounge June 25 to celebrate the unveiling of a quality-of-life venture unlike any other in the history of the Department of Defense - the grand opening of the FOX Sports Sky Box in the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing's Memorial Plaza.

"On the outside, it looks like one of our buildings, but you walk inside and go, 'Holy Cow!'" said Brig. Gen. Stephen Wilson, 379 AEW commander. "We're really lucky to have received such a fabulous place to enjoy - for the 12,000 people here today and the nearly 300,000 folks who pass through here each year. It's like walking into any nice franchise in the states. This gesture shows the commitment of corporate America - in this case FOX - to supporting our nation's Armed Forces."

Opening night drew a crowd of permanent-party and deployed 379 AEW personnel, as well as transients. Among the transient personnel was Senior Airman Dan Rodgers, a helicopter maintainer, en route to his home station, Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., from a 5-month deployment to Balad Air Base, Iraq.

"It's just like a regular bar back home," Airman Rodgers said. "I'm a sports fan - all kinds of sports, and it's really nice that FOX gave us something like this. It makes you feel like you're home."

The inspiration to build the FOX Sports Sky Box originated with the FOX Sports Media Group Chairman and Chief Executive Officer David Hill. "David Hill and the FOX NFL crew were here on their way to a live broadcast scheduled in Afghanistan for Veterans' Day," said the general. "Terry Bradshaw, Curt Menefee, Howie Long, Jimmy Johnson, Michael Strahan, Jay Glazer, along with FOX Sports executives and staff, went all over the base with us visiting our various units, then stopped to relax at the Desert Eagle Lounge."

While at the lounge, the FOX Sports party agreed that servicemen and women deserved something special.

"After touring the base and meeting a bunch of great people, they bring us to the base lounge to wait, and it's pretty basic," said FOX NFL SUNDAY co-host Terry Bradshaw speaking for the group. "I mean, it gets the job done in a no fuss, no muss way, but we all agreed that the guys and gals fighting for our country deserved something better. Then we learned that the Air Force planned to re-do the place, so we hatched this idea."

FOX offered to donate all furniture, fixtures and equipment, to include TVs, pool tables, tables, chairs, flooring, the bar and bar equipment, murals and wall art, and the sound/AV system.

"FOX also donated a franchise license to the local Morale, Recreation and Welfare Fund needed to operate the FOX Sports Sky Box," said Lt. Col. Paul Kopecki, 379th Expeditionary Force Support Squadron commander.

"The equipment alone is estimated to be worth over \$500,000," he added. When including the free franchise license, stateside shipping, signed memorabilia, etcetera, FOX donations amount to considerably more, said the colonel.

Upon higher headquarters review and approval of the FOX proposal, implementation plans went into action.

"FOX's donations came to 36 pallets, accumulated from about 10 different manufacturers all over the United States," General Wilson explained. "We just had to figure out how to get it here."

The answer was to move the pallets here via load training missions for the tanker crews rotating in and out of the base, he added. Once the pallets reached the base, it was up to Airmen across the 379 AEW to finish the job.

The 379th Expeditionary Civil Engineer, Logistics Readiness, Communications, Contracting, Maintenance and Force Support Squadrons, 8th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron, the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing Judge Advocate staff and the 379th Expeditionary Operations Group all played key roles in the facility's transformation from concept to reality.

"Our folks have done all the leg work to build this in only 90 days," General Wilson said. "The building has been 100-percent redone – totally demolished in six days. They took out everything to the studs and put in new flooring, new walls, new electrical, new ceiling, new everything. They've all worked very hard to make this happen and they've done a fabulous job."

The project, from start to finish, was a team effort on multiple fronts.

"The FOX Team has been truly exceptional," Colonel Kopecki said. "Their enormous generosity coupled with extreme flexibility to accommodate us, made this a once-in-a-lifetime partnership. "We also had huge assistance from throughout the Air Force," he added.

"Volunteers from Shaw, Travis and McConnell Air Force Bases, the Air Force Services Agency and (Manpower and Personnel) have all contributed, as well. It has truly been a remarkable military and community effort. Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, DOD civilian employees, contract personnel and Coalition forces living and transiting through the base to or from forward-deployed locations across the Central Command area of responsibility will be able to benefit from the facility.

"The FOX Sports Sky Box is a great reminder that corporate America still cares and supports our troops, and this place is fantastic," Colonel Kopecki said. "When sitting in the unique Sky Box-themed environment, watching five or six different sports at one time, our servicemembers are going to feel like they're back home in their favorite sports bar."