Boot Camp Offers Close Inspection of Military Life

By Erica Plouffe Lazure

Make no mistake about it. When they send you to boot camp, even as a civilian, you actually have to wear boots, as Marilyn Sheerer discovered late last month.

Sheerer, dean of East Carolina University's College of Education, spent a week participating in the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference, learning the ins and outs of the U.S. Military. She traveled from the Pentagon in Washington D.C. to Fort Moody in Georgia, the naval yard of San Diego, Calif., and the Northern Command in Colorado. Along with 59 other academic and business leaders from across the nation, Sheerer learned how to shoot an M-16, flew in a helicopter, examined the innards of submarines and shook hands with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

But she also left with a better understanding of how the military is run, its complex role in the security of the United States and how institutions like public universities can do their part in serving the needs of the nation and its soldiers. Part of it, she said, has to do with building up existing programs at ECU and part of it has to do with changing general attitudes and perceptions about the military.

"I found that there's a gap between the military and the public's perception of the military," she said. "My sense is that you either get critical reviews about the military or you get praise. But, whether we feel positive or negative about the military, do we really have an understanding of what our defense systems are and what our capabilities are?"

Sheerer said the group had many discussions about better engaging the public in service and safety projects. Locally, Sheerer saw great potential in making more students aware of ECU's ROTC program, and finding more ways to fully utilize ECU's distance education programs to encourage enlisted military to earn degrees.

"The College of Education is into distance education programs. We have to really consider that, because we have so many military bases in this state. As a university, we have to find more and better ways to be responsive to their needs," she said. "We can be there."

For example, working with Steve Duncan, ECU's director of Military Programs, the university could market degrees in education to enlisted soldiers, she said. When a soldier retires or leaves the military, he or she could utilize the degree to become a teacher.

"If we can get them to think about a transition into teaching, then we could help curb our shortage of teachers," she said. Duncan recommended Sheerer to attend the conference earlier this year.

The conference traveled to six states in eight days, and participants toured each of the United States' military command centers. Each military branch offered the