



## Commentary

### Unquestionably, Tampa is an Air Force town

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Walking through Tampa International Airport recently, a mother and daughter stopped me while I was checking my bags for a flight to St Louis. The woman said, "Excuse me, sir, I wanted to just say, 'Thank you for all you do.'"

The men and women serving our nation at MacDill Air Force Base honestly get this a lot as we travel, and we appreciate your recognition. But it works both ways. I want to take this opportunity to hold up a mirror to the people of Tampa and say, "Thank you," for what you do for your guests, the military community of MacDill Air Force Base.

I want to thank you first for what you do for military families. You welcome us into your homes, churches, civic organizations and schools. You get to know us and make us part of your community. This is extremely important because there are so many deployed soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, who rely on your support for their families while they are away.

Perhaps the most difficult part of being a military family is the required moves every two to four years. In my career, my family has moved 14 times over the past 21 years. While parents can endure this constant state of change, it is more difficult for children. And this is where you, the people of Tampa, specifically the people of Hillsborough County, have made the biggest impact. You have welcomed our children into your public and private schools and have given them a great education.

Hillsborough County public schools are among the very best my family has encountered during our military career. I have seen firsthand the great education and support you provide. Strengthening military families is important in my role as MacDill's installation commander. Hillsborough County Public Schools continues to demonstrate excellence.

Just reading recent articles, I found several examples of academic excellence. This year, the district was awarded the Beacon Award by the College Board for achieving the largest increase in the number of students earning AP scores of 3 or better of any school district in the nation. Robinson High School ranks No. 81 in the Nation's High Schools Challenge, according to the Washington Post!

Hillsborough County has three schools nationally recognized by U.S. News & World Report as best high schools: Plant and Tampa Bay Technical were both recognized with silver awards and Robinson with a bronze award.

I also hear plenty of praise for Hillsborough County's phenomenal International Baccalaureate Program. Many MacDill Air Force Base dependents attend Robinson High School's "IB" program and simply love it. The state and county also offer an incredible "virtual school" program. My daughter takes Algebra I online. Such programs translate into increased options that ultimately help to stabilize military students, allowing academic continuity. The county also does a great job offering music, orchestra, choir and extracurricular sports programs that many military families enjoy as they move from place to place.

In addition to the fine education you provide for our children, you also support our spouses and extended family. Military spouses often choose to follow the military member and must sacrifice career advancement due to frequent moves. Tampa Bay has extended a hand to our working military spouses, providing them with a bridge to the next step in their careers.

You also welcome us into your churches and community organizations, giving us an instant connection to the community. Your medical care for our families is world-class. And, your support for our Wounded Warriors is out of this world!

Please accept this "thank you" from one member of the Tampa military community. I see your outreach to the military daily. Tampa Bay and Hillsborough County are great places to live.

Col. Lenny J. Richoux is wing and installation commander at MacDill Air Force Base.