

JUNE 15, 2022

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ROLLING OUT THE WELCOME MAT

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MILITARY CITIES SERIES: HAMPTON ROADS

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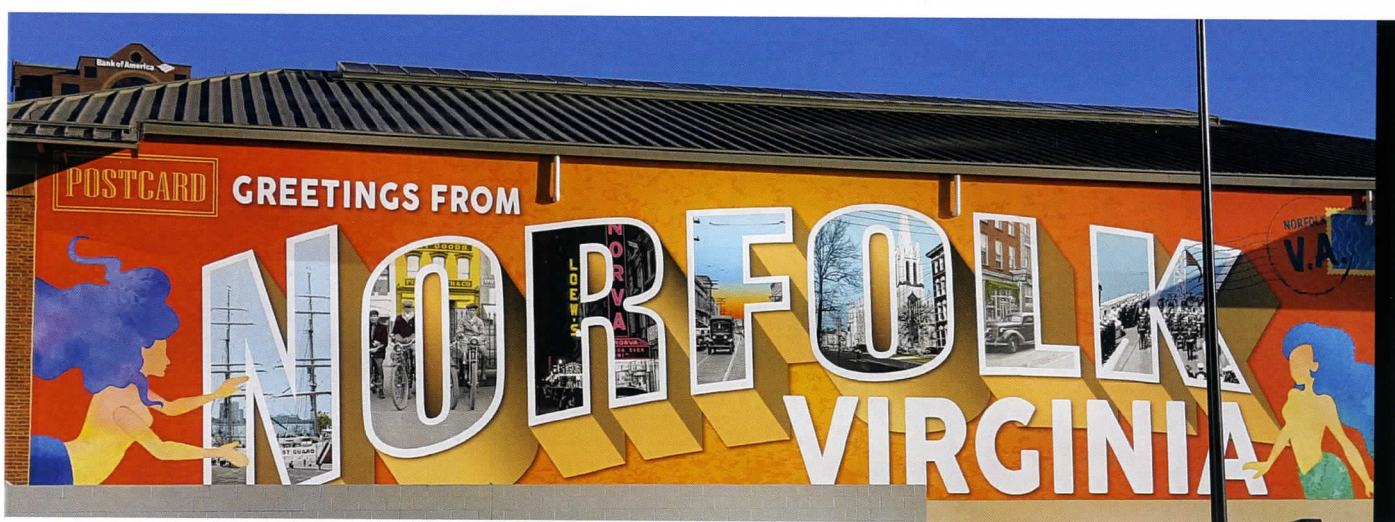
The region of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina known as Hampton Roads – encompassing the cities of Hampton, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Newport News and Chesapeake – boasts one of the largest concentrations of active duty military troops and their families in the country. In fact, the area has been called the East Coast epicenter of military activity; it's home to the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet and the largest U.S. Navy base in the world, as well as major bases for the Coast Guard, Army, Air Force and Marine Corps.

According to the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, the total U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) population, including active duty and civilian personnel, is estimated at 150,000 people in an area with a total population of 1.6 million; DOD spending accounts for 45.6% of all regional economic activity. Among the major military installations is the only North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) command on U.S. soil, NATO's Allied Command Transformation. Other major military units include the U.S. Joint Forces Command, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, the U.S. Air Force's Air Combat Command, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command, and the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. The military currently has 64 ships home ported in the area and 36 aircraft squadrons. The Coast Guard 5th District and Base are headquartered in Portsmouth, and the Coast Guard Training Center is located in York County.

The result of this large military presence is a community that is extremely accommodating to active duty troops and their families. "This absolutely is a military-friendly community, as there are bases for almost every branch," points out military spouse Laura Smith, who moved to the area with her husband, Coast Guard Petty Officer Third Class Matthew Smith, in June 2021. "The 'vibe' of the area is friendly and welcoming; we do hope we are here for a good while."

The Smiths live in off-base housing in Hampton; the Coast Guard does not offer on-base hous-

Laura Smith and her husband P03 Matthew Smith



ing in the area. “My husband does a 35-minute commute everyday down to Portsmouth; I work in Hampton, 15 minutes from our house,” Smith noted, adding that the area is extremely convenient. “All shopping is within the drive between my house and work.”

The convenience factor was quite a pleasant surprise, she explains, as she was born and raised in a small town in Connecticut. “When we moved to Virginia, my husband had been stationed previously in Boston. I went from a small town that involved going anywhere else to go shopping, go on a hike, or really do anything, to a town that is convenient for doing everything.”

The one downside to the area can be traffic jams, particularly on the major harbor crossings of the Hampton Roads Beltway interstate, including the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel (HRBT) and the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel (MMMBT) both of which link the large population centers of Hampton Roads. “I do have to say that if the military base is not on the Peninsula and you have to drive down to Virginia Beach or Norfolk area, sometimes the bridge-tunnel does come to a dead stop,” Smith explained. “If you can avoid the requirement of taking the bridge, your life will be so much easier.”

The region has a lot to offer in terms of family-friendly recreation, including a seemingly endless array of beaches. “There are beaches at every turn,” Smith points out. “We love going to Buckroe Beach – it is seven minutes from our house and it has a parking lot with easy access and a grassy area with gazebos for picnics so that you can eat away from the

sand. I have found that on Saturday mornings they have a farmers’ market on the other side of the parking lot. It is a beautiful beach that is not crazy busy, with piers and everything you could need.

“The Virginia Air and Space Science Center, Fort Monroe, breweries, the Norfolk Zoo, and the Butterfly Garden are a couple things my husband and I enjoy doing,” she continued, noting that their favorite pastime is “to go on walks with the dogs and enjoying time together, which can be hard in military families when a significant other is not home all year round.”

As far as restaurants, there are numerous chain locations around the area, but not too many independent eateries, Smith notes. “Unfortunately, I would say there are not many restaurants that you would not be able to find anywhere else. If you go to the next town over, Newport News, there is an amazing Mexican restaurant called Salsa’s.”

Most restaurants and entertainment choices in the area are great for military families on a tight budget, she points out. “In Hampton Roads, there is such a high military presence that going shopping, going to Busch Garden or really going out to do anything in the area, everyplace offers military discounts.”

As far as settling in, Smith says it can take a while to adjust, but most families do have some military connection. She recalls being surprised to learn about her own family’s military experiences. “When it comes to the military, I never thought I would have anything linking me to the military, but as I got older I learned my grandfather was in the Navy; my

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Hampton Roads**
From the Hampton Roads
Chamber of Commerce website:
[https://www.hrchamber.com/
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“Norfolk is a charming, waterside urban center where business, education, and recreation are always close by. The city has a vibrant downtown home to businesses small and large, and our diverse economy is one of the nation’s strongest. You’ll find a thriving arts scene, renowned museums, beautiful neighborhoods and one-of-a-kind restaurants. Norfolk hosts the world’s largest naval base, the region’s international airport and is one of the busiest international ports on the East Coast.”

uncle was in the Army working at the Pentagon; and flash forward to present time, my brother is in the Army and now I am married to an amazing man in the Coast Guard. Just like that my life became military!” she observes.

Smith says that social media has helped her connect with other families in the area. “I have found groups on Facebook of Coast Guard spouses of Hampton Roads, which has been helpful with keeping up with what is going on in our surrounding area,” she reports, adding, “Everyone around here is super friendly and they know that the military is a huge part of the state, so they are super welcoming to new people.”

