

OTC supports community partner at Florence festival

by Eloise Lundgren, OTC Public Affairs



Figure 1 Brigadier Gen. Don MacWillie, commanding general of USAOTC, waves from a white Corvette during the 37th Florence Friendship Festival parade Saturday. OTC's Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bobb follows in a red Corvette ahead of the 1st Cav. Div. Band. MacWillie and Bobb were grand marshals at this year's event. Chris Hodge, OTC

FLORENCE – The 37th Florence Friendship Festival was more than a parade, barbecue cook-off, arts and crafts fair and lawnmower race to two Central Texas leaders; it was about communities getting together to promote goodwill, patriotism and family values here Saturday.

“This (festival) is what America is all about,” Brig. Gen. Don MacWillie, U.S. Army Operational Test Command commanding general, said. “Friends and neighbors bring their families together to celebrate all that is right with our nation.”

MacWillie and USAOTC Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bobb served as grand marshals for the parade that made its way from one end of Florence to the city park. Florence Mayor Mary Condon, who rode in the parade along with other city and Williamson County officials, echoed MacWillie's sentiments.

"It is so wonderful to see all the people from all over Central Texas turn out today," Condon said. "And it's particularly great to see the terrific support we got from Fort Hood and Operational Test Command."

Schools, churches, businesses, law enforcement agencies, political groups, youth groups, firefighters and emergency service personnel were joined by the 1st Cavalry Division Band and Horse Cavalry Detachment to make the event a memorable experience for the onlookers that lined the streets to wave and cheer.

"We are particularly pleased to have the First Cavalry Division Band with us today," Shawn Rizzo, parade coordinator, said. "Our high school band is competing in state competition today, so we wouldn't have had a band if it weren't for the First Cavalry Division."

According to Julie Ward, Florence business owner and parade announcer, there were 41 parade entries this year.

"We used to hold our Friendship Festival in June," Ward said, "but a few years ago we decided to move it to October – not as hot then."

"We've always drawn participants from throughout Central Texas," she continued, "and we have them this year from Leander, Jarrell, Cedar Park – you name it."

Rizzo, who is the Florence bi-weekly newspaper owner-editor, said several USAOTC Soldiers had also volunteered to judge barbecue at the cook-off held later in the afternoon in the city park.

“We’re really pleased to have such a community partner like Operational Test Command,” she said. “It’s a real boost to our community.”

“We all had a very good time,” Capt. Jim Simpson, USAOTC Headquarters and Headquarters Command Company commander, said. “It was really hard to pick a winner because all the entries were delicious.”