

Peyton Manning's Journal as shared with *ESPN.com* following his first USO Tour in the Spring of 2013

Monday, Feb. 25

On plane right now, we are flying to Rota, Spain. We will visit troops there all day, then fly to Naples, Italy, Tuesday night to visit some more troops. Today we took a tour of the Pentagon and went to Walter Reed Hospital to visit the wounded warriors. I visited with many amputees while they were rehabbing and learning to walk with their prosthetic legs. Their attitudes on life, determination to get better and desire to remain in the military were very inspiring. Signed a lot of footballs and took lots of pictures. If I ever whine or complain about anything ever again, then shame on me after what I witnessed today.

Our leader on this USO tour is Adm. James Winnefeld. I have been talking to him on the plane for the past two hours, and he is as impressive a leader as I have ever been around. I asked him many questions about his thoughts on leadership as it may relate to playing quarterback, and he had some great insight. Our country is lucky to have him.

The rehab staff here is outstanding. After our visit to Walter Reed, the admiral took Curt Schilling, Clyde Christensen and me to his 14-year-old son John's baseball practice. Afterward, this same group went to Arlington National Cemetery to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and JFK's tomb. It was my first time to either site and it was pretty moving. We had dinner at the admiral's house in a military neighborhood. He told me that Gen. Patton once resided in the home. Threw some passes with the admiral's son, L.J. We then boarded a plane that looks like Air Force One on the outside and off we went.

Tuesday, Feb. 26

We just took off from Spain and are flying now to Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy. We will see troops there and then fly on to Naples. In Rota, the first stop we made was a plane hangar where about 40 or so troops were gathered. The admiral presented the Bronze Star to three troops who had performed outstanding duties in action in Afghanistan. It was a short ceremony but a huge honor for these three soldiers.

We got to visit with the troops there. We then went over to the main base and visited with more troops and many family members. Lots of family members live over here with these troops on the base or were visiting. That is not the case in Afghanistan, where no family members will be there. Lots of football fans. I spoke briefly onstage and thanked all the troops for their service. I told them that one of my driving forces in my football career has always been to be accountable to my team, and to do my job to help the team. Nowhere is that philosophy more defined and displayed than in our armed forces.

The base commander gave me three names to call out and I threw a pass to each one of them -- a football signed by me, Austin Collie and Vincent Jackson. Two women and one male. The man, Eric Wagner, and first woman, Linda Pena, each dropped the pass twice until they finally caught it. The second female, Mara Giardini, caught it the first time. They all got big applause when

they caught the pass. We then took group pictures with the people present, probably 200 people or so. The other visits will be much larger, I am told. I stood next to Schilling in the photo line. His dad was in the military, and he is really good with the troops. He told them that he hates all Yankees fans except the ones in the military.

One comment that stuck out was when a soldier thanked me for coming over and "bringing some of home" to him and his fellow soldiers. That told me we were doing a good deed for these special men and women. Let me tell you, whatever store over here in Spain sells footballs has to be sold out. Wish I had some stock in it.

Wednesday, Feb. 27

On plane right now flying from Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, to Al Dhafra, United Arab Emirates. We will spend the night in a hotel there tonight and then fly to our next stop in the morning. Djibouti is home for about 2,000 troops. No families over here, military personnel only. Did the show throwing footballs again. Took pics and shook hands with a lot of troops. They don't sell footballs in Djibouti. Any football that I signed was worn down because the troops throw it around over on the base.

Afterward, we went to the cafeteria and had dinner with the folks. I sat with about four guys who are what they call Seabees, part of the Navy. It really is CB, which stands for Construction Battalion. They have been around since WWII. They are building anything that our forces need - runways, hangars, smaller command bases. Took some more pics and signed some stuff in the cafeteria and then we were sent to the aircraft base to fly back out. Before that, a guy grabbed me by the arm and told me he was a special op from Colorado and could I come meet the rest of his team, all of whom were from Colorado and all big Broncos fans. He said that I had to go with him and to his team's office and that he should not take me in there because of the highly classified intelligence in there but that he would ask for forgiveness later.

As I was walking over there I asked a member of the admiral's staff, Capt. Ross Meyers, "What does special ops mean, exactly?" and he said that I was about to go meet Navy SEALs, all from Colorado. We took a group picture, I thanked them for their service, and they thanked me for coming. Then I headed back to the bus to head to our plane. Before we boarded, we got to watch three F-16s take off back-to-back-to-back. Serious, serious speed. Have seen these flying over me before kickoff a bunch, but never on a takeoff. It was quite a spectacle. They told us we were not allowed to video the takeoffs for security reasons. (Naturally, Schilling filmed the whole thing with his camera phone.)

I learned all Navy SEALs are studs but then there are special SEALs. They are known as the Elite Elite. They will shoot up to 100,000 rounds of ammo a year in practice shooting. They are doing the major specialized jobs (i.e. killing bin Laden, those pirates who kidnapped that boat captain for ransom a few years ago). Pretty amazing stuff.

Thursday, Feb. 28

Thursday was truly an awesome day. Flew out on a C-2 from the UAE to an aircraft carrier, the USS Stennis. I'm not allowed to say where the ship was located exactly, but I can say it was outside the Arabian Gulf. We did the landing on the ship like you see in the movies with the cable wire. About 12 of us, helmets and goggles on for takeoff and landing. I got to sit up in the cockpit for half the flight. They let me make a few announcements on the PA system. I announced that in order for us to land we needed Curt Schilling and coach Clyde Christensen to please sit on opposite sides of the plane for weight-balance issues. Pilots got a good laugh out of that one.

The teamwork displayed between these pilots and the crew on the ship was absolutely incredible. Once we were on the ship, we got to watch other planes land. Everybody has a role. The purple shirts -- grapes, as they call them -- are in charge of fuel. Yellow shirts are flight-deck directors; white shirts are safety; red shirts are ordnance, salvage, crash situations. It was awesome to see and understand just how skilled our military personnel are in this country and how much pride they take in their profession.

We were greeted off the plane by Capt. Ron Reis, Rear Adm. Troy M. "Mike" Shoemaker and Capt. John Beaver. Three studs. Reis and Shoemaker are great leaders. Five thousand sailors on board, lot of people to lead. We did the USO show for a big crowd. The crowd was awesome for the show. Many people told me how big of a morale booster it is for us to be there. We took group pictures again with all the sailors. Great people. My body's way off with jet lag for sure but I don't get tired because these people fire me up and inspire me. I autographed a mortar for one sailor. My first mortar. He told me it was used in Desert Storm. Pretty cool.

We flew back out a la "Top Gun," zero to 150 mph in about 2 to 3 seconds. Serious jolt and rush, similar to a solid blindside hit by Bruce Smith. Landed back at UAE, and then we went to the military base there, Al Dhafra. Went and did another show for this base. One guy dropped throws three times, poor guy. We had to bring him up real close where I had to underhand it to him to get the completion. Crowd loved it. Female officer came right after him and snagged the catch from same distance. Crowd went crazy. Bunch of people again said thanks for bringing some of America to them. That's what it's all about.

Friday, March 1

We started early today with a 6 a.m. departure from hotel. Boarded a C-17 plane in Al Dhafra, bound for Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. Previously, aside from the plane to the USS Stennis, we had been flying a C-40, which is a blue-and-white 737. The C-17 is a hoss of a plane. It's a gray military-looking aircraft. It's used for transporting tanks, cars, Hummers, etc. I sat in the cockpit for takeoff with three other pilots, which was sweet. They let me have the PA system again once we were at cruising altitude. The pilots gave me some good aircraft lingo before I hit the button, and I hit 'em with, "This is your captain, Captain Manning speaking, welcome aboard. We are currently cruising at altitude 40,000 feet, currently looking at 35 degrees in our destination, Afghanistan. If you look out your windows, you will see quite a lot of sand. There will be breakfast served in our first-class cabin [which of course there was no such thing on this plane], but unfortunately for those of you sitting in the back in steerage, you are out of luck. [Collie and Clyde were busy taking pics outside before we boarded and got on the plane late, so they had to

sit in the back of the plane.] I am currently flying the plane, and I want you to sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight. Crosscheck." Got a good ovation from the rest of the flight crew but one of the crew told me that crosscheck was not a term the pilots used, it was a flight-crew term, one that flight attendants use. I apologized and reminded her that was why I am just a dumb jock and not an Air Force pilot.

Then, I experienced a true first in my life. I have thrown footballs in lots and lots of places. Boats, prisons, schools, military bases, hospitals, golf course fairways, malls, birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, Mardi Gras floats, French Quarter, etc., but I ain't never thrown a football in an airplane. And I am not talking about little 3-yard lob passes. I was throwing 35-yard bullets to a guy who had the best hands on the entire USO tour, Senior Airman Stephen Gasperic. He was catching passes while trying to avoid falling over luggage, probably a couple of missiles back there as well for all I knew. He fell over a couple of times on some high throws, but he never dropped one. I told him Coach Fox may want to use him on third down next year in the slot opposite Brandon Stokley. Winnefeld was also throwing with me. He has a solid arm. I asked him if this throwing was OK, hoping it wasn't disrupting the crew, etc. He assured me that this is why we were there. To boost morale, to lift their spirits, to anyone in the military. Forces, pilots, engineers, you name it. That's what Bob Hope did years ago and that's what we were doing. Made me feel good.

Finished my throwing for the day with some pass patterns to Staff Sgt. Christine Myers. Everything was solid on her part except she dropped the first two passes. On the third one, I put her on a 12-yard hook route, she snagged it effortlessly, great catch for a touchdown. I asked her if she wanted to spike it. She said yes but she wouldn't because she did not want to break any of the surveillance equipment on board. (Never heard that one after a touchdown.) The whole thing was really a special moment. One of the real highlights of the trip was seeing the smiles on their faces. All the flight crew members were filming and taking pictures of the throwing. Most of them got to catch a pass.

After 2 hours, 40 minutes of throwing while flying, we landed at Camp Bagram in Afghanistan. Home to roughly 13,000 military personnel. Snow covered the mountains over here. Walking off the plane, my mood changed. Similar to running out onto the field before a game. Just knowing that I was walking into a place where our troops are facing dangers every day. It's hard to describe in words, but it was just a different feeling. We were greeted by Air Force Brig. Gen. Joseph T. Guastella. A man's man this guy. He told us how excited his men and women were to see us. Another officer told me that our casualties are way down compared to before, which is a sign that the Afghan military is taking over more. That's certainly good to hear, but he would rather be saying zero casualties. Just another reminder of the sacrifices these men and women make. I shook hands with lots of troops right off the plane. I could tell they were pumped.

We bused over to an indoor facility and did the show. Obviously, not everyone on base could be there but a big, excited crowd was present. I immediately started taking pics and signing autographs. Thanked them for what they do and told them I pray for them and their families every night in my talk on stage and we threw the eight passes into the crowd or on stage. Best catch of the tour took place at this show by Sgt. John Albighetti. Guessing around upper 40 or 50 years old. We called his name out and the deal was you had to catch the pass right where you

were standing. He was standing on a table about 40 yards back with people all around him. I took a little five-step drop, pumped left and fired what I call a hump throw into the sergeant's chest. He snatches it out of the air, falls backward into the crowd, disappears for about two seconds, then pops back up, ball raised in the air like receivers do when they want to prove to the ref they caught it. May not be in same class as Lynn Swann, David Tyree or Dwight Clark, but it has to go into a top 10 somewhere considering the moment and situation. All the troops in the crowd went nuts, huge applause. Signed a bunch more after that and took a ton more pics with the men and women. We then headed out on a flight for our next stop, Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, which the troops call Camp Leatherneck.

Camp Leatherneck is home base to roughly 3,000 troops. We were met again by the base commander, Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Mark Gurganus. Warmer here. No snow. No mountains. We headed to an outdoor staging area. The general said that the base had been rocketed the day before 12 times, and six did some damage to our airstrips. They had also lost a man and had two others wounded in a bomb explosion. This certainly made the whole thing very real to me. He said that it was good that we were here, that the troops needed a boost. As before, signed lots of autographs, took lots of pics, before and after the show. Did the same throwing routine. Lance Cpl. Rowback, a female officer, made a nice catch on about a 35-yard post pattern. You might say what's the big deal on that? Well, the big deal is she caught it while carrying an M-16 rifle on her back. I am not sure even Marvin Harrison or Reggie Wayne could have done that. Certainly another first for me on my list of completed passes.

In the mass of troops, I was meeting and shaking hands and had one soldier say to me, "Good seeing you again, Peyton." I looked at him for a second, and said, "Edmund Barnes? From Mrs. Silverstein's kindergarten class at Newman?" He nodded and we had a good reunion. I recognized him because I do have a good memory on things like that, but I actually have a picture of this class in my closet in Denver. I see it often, and Edmund looks the exact same. He is a captain in the Marines, and it was awesome and a proud feeling to see him. I signed as many things and took as many pics as I could. I wished I had more time to talk to them, but they had to go back to their duties and we were heading on a seven-hour flight to Ramstein, Germany. One of the most unique moments in my life and one I will never forget. Standing in the middle of a base in Afghanistan, where a war is still going on, signing footballs, taking pictures on every soldier's iPhone, talking football, talking life, hopefully inspiring these soldiers a little bit. I know for damn sure they have inspired me.

Landed in Germany. Ramstein Air Force Base. Largest Air Force base in Europe. Fifty-thousand service men and women on base. We did the show in a mall on the base. About 2,000 people. Many of the folks there were family members of troops either working on base, deployed in Africa or Afghanistan or somewhere else, or wounded. Obviously, all of the military families have a special bond. Eight-for-8 throwing at the mall. Best catch was made by a 1-year-old baby boy wearing an 18 Broncos jersey being held by his mom wearing an 18 Colts jersey. (I took a little off this throw, by the way.) I did meet a military couple with identical twins named Peyton and Eli. Honest. I did think Peyton was a little better-looking. We took group pictures after that with many of the folks there and headed to hotel.

Saturday, March 2

Before we took off for Andrews in D.C., we stopped at the hospital at the Ramstein Base, called Landstuhl. We met some of the doctors and nurses who talked to us about the work the hospital does. They said fewer wounded warriors are coming from down range, which I learned means Afghanistan, where the action is, which is a good sign. The goal is to treat them at the hospital in order to get them back home or to Walter Reed Hospital. The admiral thanked the staff for all of their incredible work they have been doing during this war. They are heroes as well for sure.

Boarded the C-40 plane for the nine-hour flight to D.C. About to land as I type, and it truly has been a life-changing trip for me. I have such great respect and admiration for our men and women in our armed forces. I am going to tell any athlete I know to go on a USO tour. I will do another one. I hope that I can't go to Afghanistan because that will mean our troops are out of there. I will tell athletes to go visit our wounded warriors at Walter Reed. I was lucky to receive a number of military coins from a number of soldiers. These coins represent a soldier's unit. It is a pride thing, the admiral explained to me. They will be a great tangible keepsake for me. I got a couple of hats and T-shirts as well. But my main takeaways will be intangible memories that will stay with me forever. About to land. The admiral just thanked us for participating in the tour. Schilling and I stood up and thanked him and his wife for leading the tour. And we thanked his staff. Wow, are these impressive people. We thanked the USO staff. This was the 76th USO tour. Proud to have been a part of it. Think ol' Bob Hope would have been proud as well. God bless our troops.