

# AFRC Europe Tops it Off

Story and photo  
by Brian H. Temple

At the sound of shattering glass a cheer went up from approximately 175 construction workers, as well as distinguished guests, at the Armed Forces Recreation Center Europe's resort hotel construction site in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, Dec. 10.

The *Richtfest*, or "topping off" ceremony, celebrated the installation of the roof on AFRC's \$50 million, 330-room resort hotel at the base of Germany's Bavarian Alps.

In a time-honored tradition, Franz Zierenger, a master carpenter, drank three glasses of champagne toasting AFRC, the site supervisors, and the workers. He then tossed the empty flutes from a third-floor scaffolding, shattering them against a concrete floor. This German ritual is practiced to wish health and prosperity to a building's future occupants.

"Today's event is awfully exciting because there is quite a bit of history and tradition behind the idea of a *Richtfest*," said General Manager of AFRC, Europe, Richard LeBrun.

LeBrun said carpenters traditionally travelled with their tools and went from site to site looking for work. They labored for months on a project with little time off, and the *Richtfest* was a suitable time for them to celebrate. It was also a turning point, as they had to say goodbye to friends and search for more work.

The master carpenter traditionally reads an ode to the carpenter, makes several toasts, and then places a decorated evergreen tree upon the completed roof.

In larger projects such as the AFRC hotel, a crown made of tree branches is dressed with ribbons and hoisted from a crane over the site. Both the tree and the crown are symbols of continued fortune.

Because of its deep roots, the ties to a *Richtfest* go beyond superstition - tradition dictates that the ritual take place. LeBrun said when the roof is done the building's owner pays for a celebration for the people who erected it.

"If the person responsible for putting the building together was ... less than generous and didn't host an appropriate farewell party, then instead of kind remarks and the raising of a tree, the carpenter would place an upside down broom on top of the roof," LeBrun said.

This broom served as a statement to all that the host "is essentially a pretty cheap guy."

According to folklore, he said, if you do not hold a party, it could bring some bad luck upon the facility or hardship upon the family that lives there.

LeBrun is not worried, however, about the future of this consolidated resort facility. He said that through a continued team effort, future guests will have the opportunity to enjoy the facility by April 2004.

Greg Vaughn, project engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Europe District, said the completion of the roof at this time was pivotal in order to keep the construction moving. With approximately \$1 million dollars worth of work completed on the roof, the interior phase of construction can begin, Vaughn said. "We wanted to get the building protected so we can continue working through the winter. And we've done that."

Vaughn said the project is on time, mainly because of the efforts of a dedicated construction crew, coupled with the lack of heavy snowfall this season. "The Romanians have really been working their tails off. They've been out here six days a week, 12 hours a day," Vaughn said.

Vaughn said the *Richtfest* is a great way to reward the workers for their hard work, and that he is personally grateful for their efforts. Vaughn also enjoyed the day's events and said the host did a fabulous job recognizing the crew's work.

LeBrun was pleased to do so. AFRC met the bill in taking care of their crew, he said.



Brig. Gen. Robert L. Decker, Commanding General, U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center (left), talks to Christopher Forbes, corporate imaging director (center left) for AFRC Europe, about the hotel's "theme" along with Richard LeBrun, General Manager of AFRC, Europe (center right), and John Adams, Ansbach area engineer for the U.S Army Corps of Engineers, Europe District at the hotel site after the *Richtfest*, Dec. 10.