VITA Center makes dollars and sense for CFAY community

Story and photo by Dan Bowen, CFAY Public Affairs

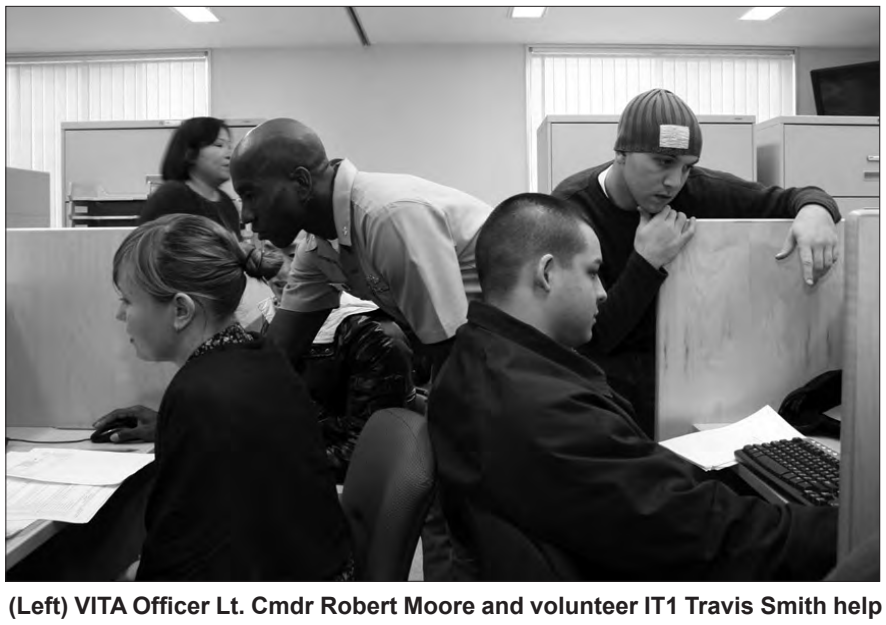
The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Center program opened for business in room 331 of the Community Readiness Center, on board Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) Feb. 2. The program will continue through April 15.

VITA gives Sailors and their family members the ability to get help with their taxes and often get their returns done for free by trained volunteers from various commands on board the base.

Services will be provided on a walk-in basis for customers with simple returns. Customers who have complex returns, for example individuals who have bought, sold or rented property, or have traded stocks or bonds during the year, should call the tax center at 243-6465 to see whether an appointment is necessary.

Navy Legal Service Office (NLSO) Judge Advocate General Lt. Byron Nakamura is serving as the program coordinator this year and believes the program is an excellent asset to the base. "All of our tax preparers have been trained... so they're fully capable of handling whatever comes in through the door," said Nakamura. "We have four full-service stations where tax preparers, who have been qualified through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) school certification process, can help prepare more complicated returns."

The center is especially useful for forward-deployed members who have circumstances unique to serving overseas. For those members who have foreign spouses, or spouses earning foreign income, it can be a real headache trying to figure out how to get taxes done correctly and on time. Another common issue for Sailors is spouses without social security numbers or who are in the process of applying for an individual taxpayer identification number (ITIN).



(Left) VITA Officer Lt. Cmdr Robert Moore and volunteer IT1 Travis Smith help customers prepare their 2010 tax forms at the VITA Center Feb. 2. The center is located in room 331 of the Community Readiness Center and will be open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, until April 15.

"The experience I've had here has been excellent," said Cryptologic Technician (Collection) 1st Class Charles Bradford, who used the service last year as well. "The preparers are very knowledgeable. I'm married to a foreign national and last year my wife applied for an ITIN number. I had a little trouble getting it from the IRS. The preparers here expedited the process and got her a number and my refund in two weeks. It's a really good service."

The tax center is designed to be as convenient, quick and user-friendly as possible. Individuals are only asked to bring the paper work they will need to complete their returns and fill out a questionnaire when they arrive to the center.The volunteers at the tax center will take it from there. All customers should bring the following items (as applicable):

- W-2's for all jobs held by you or your spouse;
- Social security numbers for you, your spouse and your children;
- End of year bank statements (1099-Int), investment statements (1099-B, 1099-Div), and bank routing and account numbers;
- Child care expense statements;
- Education expense statements;
- Student loan interest statements;
- Home mortgage interest statements;
- Any other tax forms you have received;
- A copy of your 2008 federal return; and
- Your spouse. Both spouses must be present to sign the return. If your spouse is not present, a special power of attorney for tax purposes is required.

For more information on tax preparation assistance, stop by the tax center between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday or go online at www.irs.gov.

Gain do-it-yourself skills, affordable repairs at Auto Hobby Shop

Story and photo by Ben Avey, CFAY Public Affairs

For those Sailors and family members on board Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) with an interest in learning more about how to keep their car in tip-top shape, the Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Auto Hobby Shop is here to help.

A fully equipped self-service garage located behind the Auto Port and next to Chili's, the shop is available for authorized MWR patrons to maintain, fix or improve their privately owned vehicles.

According to Auto Hobby Shop Night Manager Tommy Johnson, the shop has placed an emphasis in recent years on inviting regular people with little knowledge of auto mechanics into the shop to learn more about taking care of their vehicles. The shop provides the tools and training which enable users to complete the work on their own.

"We'll show you how to do it, give you a tool box and then you can get in there and learn how to fix the car yourself," said Johnson. "For example, we have customers come in who have never touched a wrench in their life and want to learn how to change their oil; we show them how to do it, it's not that difficult."

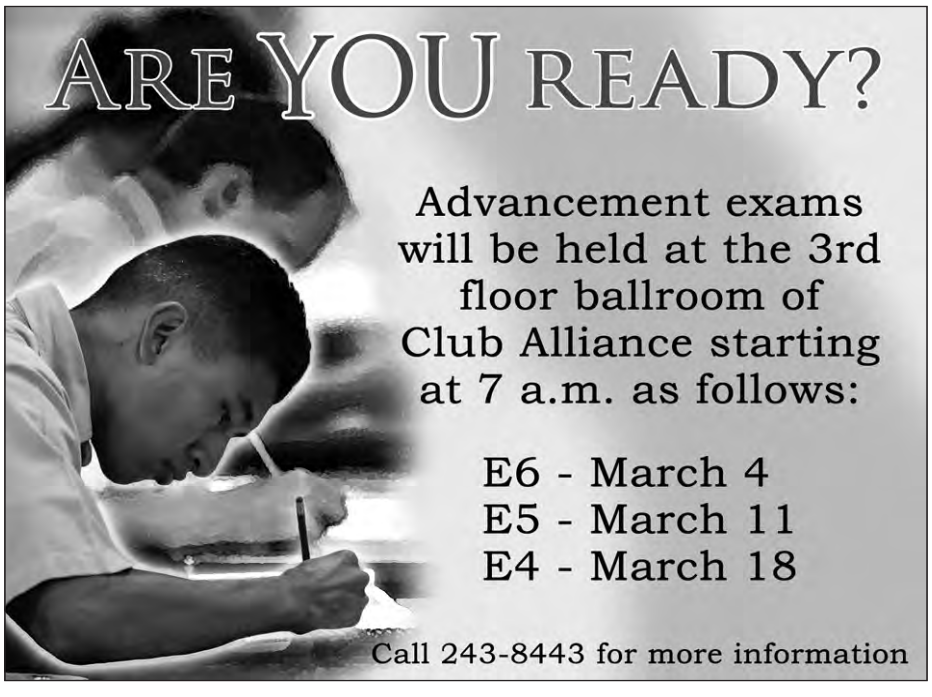
Novice mechanics have the option of attending a variety of monthly classes hosted by the Auto Hobby Shop including beginner's automotive maintenance class, pre-purchase vehicle inspection class, intermediate brakes systems and belts and tire inspection.

Of particular value to new arrivals is the pre-purchase vehicle inspection class, which walks customers through the inspection their vehicle will need to pass in order to be street legal and registered in Japan.

"It meets the Japanese car inspection requirements to ensure that everything on the car is safe so you can drive it and get all your stickers and base decals," said Johnson. "They check everything, brake lights, horns, CV (constant-velocity) Boots, steering knuckles, everything."

Course instruction is free and customers are only expected to pay the nominal daily usage fee and specific charges for use of the shop and equipment.

SRF Yokosuka electrical engineer Mark Woodward uses a pneumatic impact wrench to remove a wheel from his car at the Yokosuka Base MWR Auto Hobby Shop Jan. 30. The shop is a fully equipped self-service garage where authorized MWR patrons can maintain, fix or improve their privately owned vehicles.

Outside of regular classes, customers are always welcome to stop by the shop with questions and to work on their vehicles. For many, the shop offers a very affordable way to keep up with their car's vehicle maintenance.

"For example, you come in and you learn how to change your oil. After that, when you come, you sign in, get your car on the lift and do it yourself for about $2.50 instead of the $40 or so you'd pay to have someone else do it for you."