

Local sailor helps keep crewmen smiling

Floating silently off the coast of Yugoslavia in the Adriatic Sea is the largest naval force assembled since Desert Storm.

Its goal is simple - to stop the suffering of at least 1.5 million ethnic Albanians, liberate their homeland and safely return them to their cities and loved ones in Kosovo.

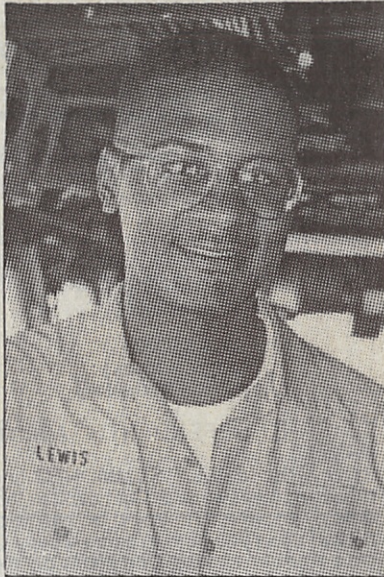
With the prospect of peace in the war-torn country, sailors such as James A. Lewis, son-in-law of Estelle Ruff of Winnsboro, know they're doing their part to restore stability and cooperation with-in the region.

As a crewmember aboard the amphibious assault ship, USS Ponce, Lewis is one of nearly 350 men and women who are deployed to provide support in the Adriatic Sea.

Lewis enlisted in the Navy in June, 1991, following his graduation from high school.

"I joined the military for its benefits, especially educational, and because of the training," Lewis said.

As a dental technician, Lewis assists the ship's dentist during



James A. Lewis

dental procedures.

"The best part of my job is knowing that I am here to help my crew, especially when someone says 'thanks a lot, now I can smile again,'" he said. "My job is important, especially when a shipmate has a toothache."

Currently, the ship and its marine amphibious ready group are operating in the Mediterranean Sea in support

of operations Allied Force and Joint Guardian.

The United States has joined 18 other NATO allies and several other nations in providing personnel, equipment and weapons in this operation. The U.S. has contributed more than 2,000 tons of food, 1,900 tons of shelter, 700 tons of equipment and 50 tons of medical supplies.

Lewis said that Navy service has been a learning experience as well as a chance to serve his country.

"I've learned that life is what you make of it," he said. "If you never think of anything positive while performing a task that you hate, then it will seem as if it will take forever to complete."

Even with participation in operations like Allied Force and Joint Guardian, there have been opportunities for camaraderie and excitement since Lewis enlisted.

"My last command was Naval Dental Center, Parris Island, S.C.," he said. "Duty was fun

because I got to work in the recruit in-processing facility and work with recruits when they first arrived at boot camp, and to wish them well just prior to graduation."

Lewis, who is married to the former Shonda Ruff, has two sons, James, Jr., 5, and Sean, 1.

"My wife usually takes the kids on outings while I am under way," said Lewis. "Homecoming means togetherness for my family; especially when my 5-year-old hugs me on the pier."

Lewis makes sure that he takes full advantage of the Navy's tremendous educational opportunities.

"I have taken college courses and completed my associate's degree since joining the Navy," said the University of South Carolina graduate. "Most of my courses were taken through the tuition assistance program. I plan to continue going to college and get a bachelor's degree before leaving the service. After the Navy, I plan to work in health care administration." **H.I.**