

Prairie Soldier

THE JOINT NEWSPAPER OF THE NEBRASKA ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

Huskers in Hurricane Alley

Brigade makes difference in Caribbean

By Pfc. Elyse Lyons
Assistant Editor

The Nebraska National Guard welcomed the 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade back to Lincoln, Nov. 15, after the brigade spent a month providing important support in the Virgin Islands following a pair of devastating hurricanes.

The 58-person brigade headquarters acted in a command and control role over National Guard personnel and units from across the United States that had been deployed to the U.S. Virgin Islands in support of the ongoing hurricane relief and recovery operations.

In September, the U.S. Virgin Islands, which are located to the east of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean Sea, were hit by two Category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria, which left devastation in their wake. Army and Air National Guardsmen from more than 30 states were deployed to the islands to assist local, territorial and federal officials in hurricane response efforts.

The Nebraska brigade headquarters – which consisted of 56 Nebraska Soldiers and two Airmen – deployed approximately a month after Hurricane Maria struck, replacing a similar brigade headquarters from Virginia. According to Col. Craig Strong, 67th MEB commander, the brigade – which was initially notified that it might support hurricane operations in Texas – was ready to do whatever it could to help the islanders deal with the disaster. Still, he added,

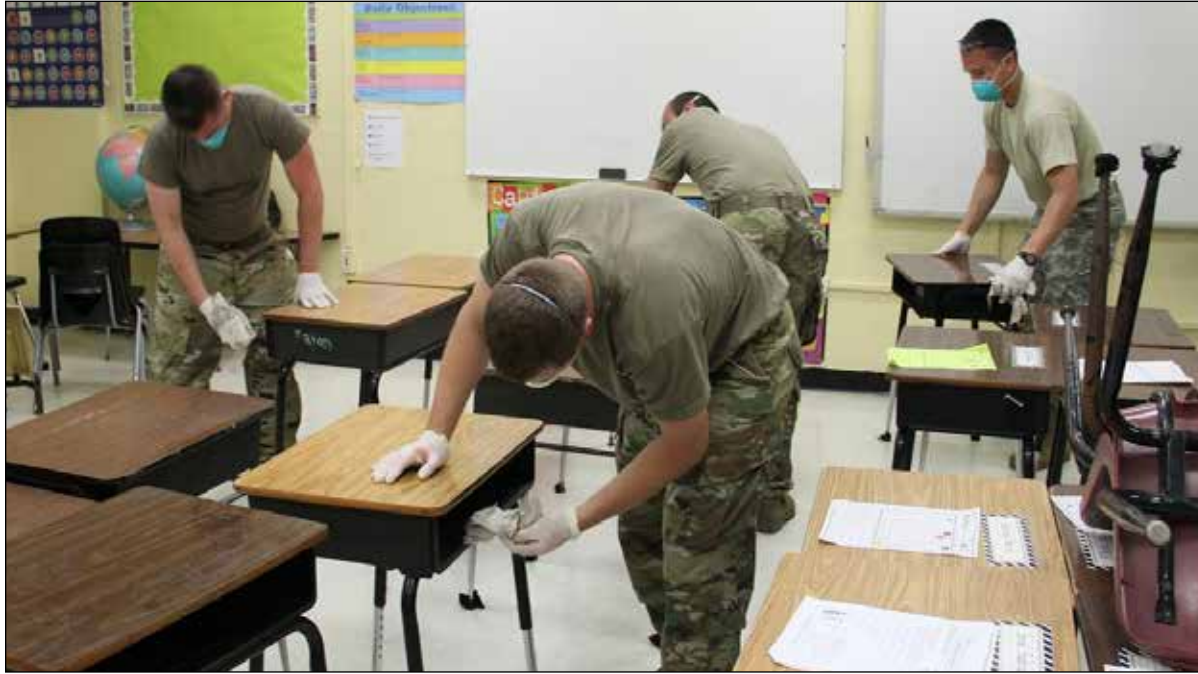


Photo by Maj. Carlos VanNurden

Cleaning Crew: Members of 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade help clean St. Croix Ricardo Richards Elementary School while on a month-long deployment to the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of hurricane relief and recovery efforts.

knowing that the mission was real and that people were depending on them, heightened the stress of the deployment.

“You get a lot of stress on an exercise, but this was real,” Strong said. “It was a real opportunity under real conditions to do what we do: mission command. It would have taken over three years to plan this level and value of training as an exercise. Some of these real-world experiences can’t be put into an exercise.”

While in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the members of the 67th MEB were in charge of coordinating the activities of various National Guard units and personnel with leaders from the territorial leader from the Virgin Islands, to include the Virgin Islands National Guard.

According to Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jennifer Kramer, a brigade administration and personnel support officer, communications and personnel accountability were extremely important, especially

considering that Soldiers and Airmen from the supporting states were constantly moving in and out of the Virgin Islands.

“Prior to us getting there, there wasn’t full accountability,” Kramer said. “I helped with personnel accountability and reporting up higher.”

Working out of the Virgin Islands National Guard’s joint force headquarters in Fredricksted on St. Croix, the Nebraska Guards-

See CARIBBEAN on 5.

Nebraskans complete mission in Puerto Rico

By Staff Sgt. Jason Wilson
Staff Photojournalist

Fourteen members of the Nebraska Air National Guard’s 155th Security Forces Squadron returned home Nov. 28, after completing a three-week deployment to Aguadilla Air Field, Puerto Rico, where they provided security for personnel, supplies and equipment during hurricane recovery operations following Hurricane Maria.

“While deployed to Puerto Rico the SFS members provided installation security, defending over \$2 billion of Air Force assets and provided food and water to people in need,” said Staff Sgt. Michael Morrison, 155th SFS supervisor.

While deployed, the Airmen worked 12-hour shifts providing security for three entry control points. The main gate was the busiest, with a lot of contractors coming through, along with trucks entering and exiting the base delivering food and water, Morrison said.

“While working the main gate, our team processed over
See PUERTO RICO on 6.

Former wing commander assumes state’s top Air Guard leadership post

By Tech Sgt. Jason Melton
Staff Photojournalist

Nebraska Air National Guard Col. James “Bob” Stevenson Jr. was promoted to the rank of brigadier general and assumed the position of assistant adjutant general of the Nebraska Air National Guard during a promotion and change of command ceremony conducted Dec. 2 at the Nebraska National Guard Joint Force Headquarters in Lincoln.

As the assistant adjutant general for air, Stevenson will now be responsible for the organization, training and equipage of the Nebraska Air National Guard, which includes the 155th Air Refueling Wing in Lincoln and the 170th Group at Offutt Air Force Base.

Prior to his current position, Stevenson served as Nebraska Air National Guard director of operations within the Nebraska National Guard’s Joint Force Headquarters. Prior to that, he served as the commander of the 155th Air Refueling Wing – the second oldest Air National Guard unit in the nation – and commander of the 170th Group.

Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, Nebraska adjutant general, presided over the ceremonies and spoke on the importance of the promotion and change of command in relation to the Nebraska Air National Guard’s diverse, worldwide mission.

“I have no doubt Bob will perform superbly as our next assistant adjutant general of the Nebraska Air National Guard,” Bohac said. “He’s a



Photo by Lt. Col Kevin Hynes

A General’s Star: Former 155th Air Refueling Wing commander James “Bob” Stevenson was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, Dec. 2, during a ceremony where many family members, including his daughters, helped promote and congratulate him.

great spokesman and he’s done a number of things nationally already.”

For example, Bohac said, during Stevenson’s recent tenure as the commander of the 155th Air Refueling Wing, he maintained an “amazing track record” of accident-free flying hours during a multi-year era when the unit set numerous annual records for flying while additionally setting the tone for why safety matters.

See STEVENSON on 4.

Newest command chief master sergeant brings career experiences to Nebraska Air Guard headquarters

By 2nd Lt. Drew Nystrom
Staff Photojournalist

More than 100 Airmen, Soldiers, family and friends attended a Dec. 2 ceremony to see Chief Master Sgt. Tyrone Bingham assume responsibility as the Nebraska National Guard’s seventh senior enlisted leader while bidding farewell to outgoing Chief Master Sgt. Douglas Lierz.

As the Nebraska Air National Guard’s new state command chief master sergeant, Bingham will now be responsible for the welfare, readiness, morale, development and care for Nebraska Air National Guard enlisted personnel based in Lincoln and Offutt Air Force Base.

Prior to his current position, Bingham served as the enlisted superintendent of the Nebraska Air National Guard’s 170th Group, which is based at Offutt Air Force Base and supports the active Air Force’s 55th Wing.

“Chief Bingham, you are the right person at the right time for this job,” said Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, Nebraska adjutant general. “We are excited to get you onboard

here to serve as the state command chief of the Nebraska National Guard and we look for great things from you.”

Bingham brings more than 22 years of experience to the position including time spent with the active duty Air Force, the Missouri Air National Guard and then the last 12 years with the Nebraska Air National Guard.



Bingham

Bingham was selected as one of the 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year by U.S. Air Force officials based on his superior leadership and job performance; significant self-improvement and personal achievements; and base and community involvement.

The 12 are selected from more than 400,000 Total Force enlisted Airmen with the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, a general

See BINGHAM on 6.

Inside

Cavalry fire mortars for first time in a decade

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NEWS DIGEST

■ General Lengyel's priorities: readiness, people, innovation

TAJI, Iraq – Being ready to fight and being lethal when we do, taking care of our people and fostering an innovative culture throughout the National Guard are the priorities Air Force Gen. Joseph Lengyel stressed to troops during Thanksgiving holiday visits.

The National Guard is America's military first responder in times of crisis in the homeland – a role enabled by its primary mission: providing ready forces to the Army and the Air Force. Thus more than 19,000 Guardsmen and women are serving shoulder-to-shoulder with active duty troops on every continent – including Antarctica.

The chief of the National Guard Bureau and his senior enlisted advisor met with Air Guard members on the flight line in Qatar; served Thanksgiving dinner to members of all services, civilians and contractors in Bagram and Kandahar, Afghanistan; and thanked the National Guard, active duty and Reserve members of a helicopter unit whose quick actions recently saved the lives of four service members hit by an improvised explosive device.

"Spending time with troops deployed overseas or engaged in domestic response missions in the homeland is the most rewarding thing I get to do," Lengyel said. "The extraordinary professionalism and capabilities of our troops motivates and humbles me."

In a profession whose members have sworn an oath indicating our willingness to sacrifice everything up to and including our lives, the mission comes first, Lengyel said.

The National Guard's readiness is high and increasing, Lengyel said. While about 19,000 Citizen-Warriors are serving globally and about 10,000 in the homeland any given day, this is significantly lower than the peak 100,000 overseas and 50,000 responding to Hurricane Katrina during the first decade of this century.

"We owe you, your families and your employers predictability – the ability to have both a civilian life and a military life," Lengyel told troops. "I don't ever want to put you in a place where you feel you have to make a choice between continuing your military career and your civilian life. We have to enable you to balance the two."

The National Guard fights America's wars, secures the homeland and builds enduring partnerships at the local, state or territory, federal and international levels. The three key missions overlap. For example, securing the homeland builds readiness to fight America's wars – and building partnerships increases the National Guard's contributions to both missions.

Lengyel is the 28th Chief of the National Guard Bureau. A member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, his responsibilities include coordinating the resourcing, training and equipping of the 448,000 members of the Army and Air National Guard; leading the Bureau, which supports the National Guard in the 50 states, three territories and District of Columbia; and acts as the nexus between federal and state equities.

■ Guard members to see changes in GI Bill benefits

ARLINGTON, Va. – Recent changes to Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits will allow more Guard members greater time in which to use those education benefits, said National Guard Bureau officials.

Signed into law in August, one of the biggest changes enacted in the "Forever GI Bill" is that beneficiaries are no longer required to use their benefits within 15 years of their last qualifying period of active duty service.

Additionally, Guard members who took part in the Reserve Education Assistance Program – an education benefit for reserve component members that ended in 2015 – may now convert any unused REAP time to the GI Bill.

With the new GI Bill changes, Guard members also start out at a higher benefit tier.

Under the previous rules, after 90 days of qualifying service, the GI Bill covered 40 percent of tuition, books and supplies and a housing allowance. At six months of qualifying service, that was bumped to 50 percent, with an additional 10 percent added for each period of six months. Now, eligible Soldiers and Airmen start out at the 50 percent tier.

Many Guard members already qualify for the 50 percent tier.

"Most Guard members are at the 50 or 60 percent tier because they have one deployment that is either just under or just over 12 months," said Don Sutton, GI Bill program

manager at NGB.

Additional changes are scheduled to take place next year, including changes to the transfer of education benefits.

"One of the things that [is scheduled to] change is being able to transfer benefits when a dependent is deceased," Sutton said, describing a situation where a service member passed his GI Bill benefits to his daughter, a high school senior who was killed in a car accident before she could use those benefits.

"He couldn't take those benefits and give them to another one of his children," he said. "This law changes that. In cases like that, the transferring parent [will be able to] transfer benefits to other dependents if the original dependent is deceased."

Additionally, the scheduled change will also allow dependents who have been given benefits to transfer them to other dependents.

"There is a provision that if the dependent has benefits and the sponsor passes away, that dependent can move the benefits they had to other dependents," said Sutton, who stressed those changes aren't scheduled to go into effect until August 2018.

However, the recent changes currently in effect were made to allow Guard members greater access to earned benefits, he said.

"This is a way to equal the playing field," Sutton said. "It gives those who earned the benefits a greater chance to use them."

Nebraska Guard celebrates 163rd birthday at museum



Photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Nebraska National Guardsmen, past and present, gathered at the Seward Museum, Dec. 9, to celebrate 163 years of being an organization. As is tradition, a senior ranking official from both the Army and the Air National Guard cut the cake along with younger representatives of both branches. Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, Nebraska adjutant general, and State Command Sgt. Maj. Marty Baker cut the Nebraska National Guard birthday cake with the two youngest service members attending the celebration, Senior Airman Treyton McNeese-Polivka and Pfc. Elyse Lyons.

On Dec. 23, 1854, acting Territorial Governor Thomas Cuming issued a proclamation encouraging the settlers of the territory to organize into militia units, with one regiment being formed south of the Platte River and one to the north. This proclamation signifies the beginning of the Nebraska National Guard.

■ Attack in Egypt highlights need for U.S. involvement in region, official says

WASHINGTON (DoD News) – The Nov. 24 attack on an Egyptian mosque in northern Sinai that killed at least 305 men, women and children is an example of why the United States must remain involved in the Middle East, Pentagon spokesman Army Col. Rob Manning said Nov. 27.

The United States must help partner nations build their own defense and police capacity to "ensure [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], al-Qaida and like-minded groups cannot plan and carry out attacks," he said.

Manning gave an overview of the area during his weekly press gaggle with Pentagon reporters. He said there are roughly 500 U.S. forces in Syria and around 5,000 in Iraq. Defense Department officials are working on providing a better run-down of U.S. forces in those countries as security considerations permit, the colonel said.

Iraqi forces are working to improve security in areas they have retaken from ISIS control, Manning said. This includes going into areas to clear them of improvised explosive devices, clearing out weapons caches, disarming booby traps and rooting out ISIS hold-outs.

"In Syria, in the last 24 hours, the [Syrian

Democratic Forces] has reinforced positions near the Iraq-Syria border, repelling an ISIS reconnaissance element," he said.

Coalition forces aided the SDF as it advanced along the southern bank of the Euphrates River. "Also coalition forces provided counter-IED training to Raqqa internal security force soldiers," he said. The coalition also passed over communications gear to Raqqa force personnel.

President Donald J. Trump spoke with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and discussed the U.S. supply of arms to the SDF. Turkish leaders are worried that arms supplied to the Kurdish portion of the SDF could end up in the hands of the [Kurdistan Workers' Party] – a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

"Consistent with that policy, we're reviewing pending adjustments to the military support provided to our Kurdish partners [in the SDF], in as much as the military requirements of our defeat-ISIS and stabilization efforts will allow us to prevent ISIS from returning," Manning said. "We remain very clear in that we are going to continue to target ISIS and remain committed to protecting our NATO ally Turkey."

Just in time for the holidays...



Photo by Pfc. Elyse Lyons

Popcorn Delivery: Ten Cub Scouts from Pack 97, a third-grade group, delivered caramel popcorn, Dec. 11, to the Nebraska National Guard. During their visit to the Joint Force Headquarters building in Lincoln, Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac talked to them about achieving their goals and staying out of trouble.

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Letters, articles, notices of events, photographs and art are welcome, but may be edited for clarity or brevity. Publication of any submission is at the discretion of the editor. Submissions can also be emailed to nenationalguard@gmail.com. All photos must be high resolution and include complete caption information.

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Dragon Fire: Soldiers from the 1-134th Cavalry Squadron duck and cover away from the blast of a 120mm mortar weapons system, Oct. 21, at Fort Riley, Kan., during Nebraska's first live-fire mortar training in more than a decade.



Barrel Cleaning: The barrel of a 120mm mortar system is cleaned by a Nebraska National Guard mortarman after firing a few rounds during a three-day, live-fire training.

Photo by Sgt. Jessica Villwok



Photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Handle With Care: Two Soldiers with the 1-134th Cavalry Squadron handle 120mm mortar munitions Oct. 10 during live-fire training at Fort Riley, Kan.

FIRE WHEN READY

Nebraska Cavalry Soldiers travel to Fort Riley to conduct first mortar fire exercise in more than a decade

By Sgt. Jessica Villwok
Staff Photojournalist

For the first time in more than a decade Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers took part in a live-fire mortar event, Oct. 20-22, at Fort Riley, Kansas. There, newly-trained mortarman from the Nebraska Army National Guard's Troops A, B and C, 1-134th Cavalry Squadron fired both 120mm and 60mm mortar weapons systems.

The event was designed to give the squad-

ron's indirect fire infantrymen (mortarmen) an opportunity to learn more about the newly received weapon systems.

Capt. Dustin McKenna, commander of Troop B, 1-134th Cavalry, said the training exercise was a significant accomplishment for Nebraska's Cavalry Soldiers.

"This is the first time the squadron, or anyone in Nebraska, has fired mortars in over 10 years," McKenna said. "As an (infantry brigade combat team) cavalry squadron, mortars are a vital part to our survivability when conducting reconnaissance."

McKenna said the 1-134th Cavalry fielded the new mortars into the unit in May. Unit noncommissioned officers then spent the next five months training Soldiers up to the point that they were ready to fire live rounds.

Firing 476 rounds of 120mm and close to 200 rounds of 60mm ammunition, unit training officers said the exercise was designed to build Soldier proficiency and confidence in their newly-learned skills. Capt. Cody Cade, who served as the exercise's officer-in-charge, said the live-fire event was an important step in improving the Nebraska cavalry squadron to combat future enemies.

"This is the first time in 10 years that anyone in Nebraska has fired an indirect fire system, let alone a mortar," Cade said. "This gives the 1-134th Cavalry the ability to engage the enemy at greater distances with more lethality."

For some Nebraska Soldiers who have held the 11C military occupational specialty for years, the exercise was actually refresher training. Sgt. Barry Erb, a member of Troop A, has been an indirect fire mortarman for over a decade.

A native of Milford, Nebraska, Erb served as the fire directions control leader for his team. He said he thought the exercise signified a major step forward for the Nebraska unit.

"It's fulfilling getting out here to do this," Erb said. "This is what we signed up for. You want to do this."



Photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Unpacking Ammo: Spc. Todd Carpenter, a mortarman with Troop B, 1-134th Cavalry Squadron, helps to unpack and ready nearly 500 rounds of munitions for the 120mm mortar weapons system. Nebraska Cavalry Soldiers trained on both the 120mm and 60mm mortar weapons systems, Oct. 21, at Fort Riley, Kan.



Photo by Sgt. Jessica Villwok

Hang It! A 60mm mortar is placed into the top of the barrel of the firing system after the base is adjusted during a fire-for-effect live training exercise, where multiple rounds are fired in rapid succession.



Photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Smoke And Flames: The flash of a 120mm mortar is caught during sunset Oct. 21 while Soldiers from the 1-134th Cavalry Squadron conduct a live-fire mortars training at a range in Fort Riley, Kan. All three troops with the 1-134th Cavalry took turns training with the anti-tank weapons systems, operating them with teams of three mortarman at all times.

Spc. Nicholas Bucy, Troop A, also participated during the training. Bucy, a native of Grand Island, Nebraska, served as an assistant gunner and said the most significant part of the weekend was the opportunity to train with other mortarman from different troops within the squadron.

"This training is really important," Bucy said. "Being able to come out into the field and get our hands on the new weapons systems allows us to become more efficient."

The Soldiers also had the opportunity

to train and learn from the Kansas Army National Guard mortarman. The Kansas Soldiers currently use the mortar weapons system and were on hand to share their expertise.

"The Nebraska Guard has had the opportunity to work with the Kansas Guard mortarman about 15 years ago," Erb said. "They know how the weapons systems and the teams are supposed to function properly. Having them here to teach us is an advantage, especially for the guys with less experience."

155th Air Refueling Wing earns 13th outstanding unit award

By Staff Sgt. Jason Wilson
Staff Photojournalist

Following a two-year period of intense deployments, record-setting flying, a massively successful air show and numerous other support missions, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts announced Dec. 15 that the Nebraska Air National Guard's Lincoln-based 155th Air Refueling Wing has been awarded the U.S. Air Force's prestigious Outstanding Unit Award.

This marks the 13th time receiving this award for the Nebraska Air National Guard's largest unit in its 71-year history. More than 860 Airmen are assigned to the refueling unit in a variety of different occupational positions, all of whom contributed to the award.

"This unit has always performed at an outstanding level," Ricketts said. "You have been able to support our allies, our coalition forces and fellow members of service around the world and in U.S. Central Command operations."

"You have demonstrated all the great values that we want to see, not only in our military, but as Nebraskans," he added. "Hard work, team work, dedication, helping your neighbors and sacrificing so that we can continue to enjoy the freedoms we have in this country."

The U.S. Air Force Outstanding unit is awarded by the Secretary of the Air Force to numbered units that have distinguished themselves by exceptionally meritorious service or outstanding achievement that clearly sets the unit above and apart from similar units.

The current award covers the period of Sept. 1, 2014 to Aug. 31, 2016.

"As a former member of the 155th, I am incredibly proud of your accomplishment and continue to take great pride in what you do," said Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, Nebraska adjutant general.

"The first award the wing received was in 1980," Bohac said. "Twenty-six of 36 years, your excellence has been acknowledged by the Secretary of the Air Force. I think

it is a testament to who we are as Nebraskans. We bring a certain kind of work ethic, attitude and value system to what we do each and every day."

Former commander of the 155th ARW, Brig. Gen. James "Bob" Stevenson said the people of the unit are what sets the unit apart from others.

"The people of this unit are what distinguishes this unit," Stevenson said. "It is a championship team. They understand the obligation that comes along with it and they believe in what we are doing."

Col. Robert Hargens, commander of the 155th ARW, agreed. "Often times the sacrifice and the efforts of the wing members is easy for it to go unnoticed and this is a time to celebrate and let people know all the fantastic things our airmen and soldiers are doing across the world," Hargens said.

The statistics accumulated by the Airmen of the 155th ARW definitely reinforce those thoughts. For example, during the award time period, the organization:

- Flew 2,276 sorties for a record 10,964 hours while offloading almost 3 million gallons of fuel in support of U.S. and Coalition aircraft conducting both operational and training missions;

- Continued its legacy of Class A/B mishap-free flying – 142,000-plus hours since 1977;

- Served as the lead/host U.S. Air force KC-135 Stratotanker unit during the nation-wide modernization and upgrade of the KC-135s' avionics systems;

- Conducted 10 separate deployment rotations involving 512 of the 155th ARW's Airmen to locations around the globe, including multiple rotations to the U.S. Central Command area of operations, where they conducted a wide variety of functions in support of ongoing U.S. operations;

- Partnered with local and state entities to successfully conduct a major open house and air show in 2016 that attracted more than 250,000 spectators;

- Supported numerous other community outreach events to

include the annual Lincoln Marathon, Cornhusker State Games, Skills USA competitions, Lincoln Public School Science Fair and more than 30 events in local schools and colleges;

- Maintained an overall personnel strength of more than 100 percent through concentrated recruiting and retention efforts;

- Underwent frequent major inspections that resulted in numerous laudatory results;

- Members of the unit also earned numerous national-level awards to include the 2015 Air Reserve Component Air Transportation Activity of the year; the 2015 Daedalian Logistics Effectiveness Awards; the USAFCEC's May 2016 Aircrew Safety Award of Distinction; the 2015 Region II Recruiting Office Supervisor of the Year; and the 2016 Armed Forces Insurance National Guard Spouse of the Year.

The members of the 155th Air Refueling Wing will be officially presented with its 13th U.S. Air Force Outstanding Unit Award at a future date.

Offutt-based group welcomes new commander in November

By Ryan Hansen
55th Wing Public Affairs

The 170th Group is under new leadership following a change of command ceremony Nov. 4 at Offutt Air Force Base.

Lt. Col. David Preisman took the group guidon from Col. Mark Hopson during the tradition rich ceremony held at the 557th Weather Wing auditorium.

The 170th Group is a Nebraska Air National Guard unit consisting of 80 authorized personnel, including 35 full-time and 45 traditional, or part-time, ANG members.

"Every time a new commander has taken command (of the 170th Group), the unit has gotten better and better," said Brig. Gen. Keith M. Schell, Nebraska National Guard assistant adjutant general - air, who presided over the ceremony. "Each commander continues to raise the bar...and I know Dave is going to do a great job."

Preisman is the sixth commander in the history of the group and comes from the 238th Combat Training Squadron, where he had been commander since 2012.

"To the men and women of the 170th Group, you already rock the mission every day without fail," he said. "I will do everything I can to knock down policy barriers that get in the way of your success by simultaneously watching what you do every day with admiration and pride."

Preisman was commissioned through the Reserve Officer Training Corps at Virginia Tech in 1995. After serving on active duty for ten years, he accepted a full-time position in the Guard in 2005 and has served in



Photo by Lt. Col. Kevin Hynes

Passing Of Colors: Lt. Col. David Preisman takes command of the 170th Group, Nov. 4, as the sixth commander in the unit's history.

a variety of positions.

"You are the premier total force unit in the entire Air Force," he told the members of the 170th Group in attendance. "I believe my service to you, not the other way around, matters more now than it ever has."

Hopson will retire after nearly 25 years in the Air Force as an active duty and ANG member. He earned his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 1991 and joined the Guard in 2002.

"During Mark's time in command of the 170th, and throughout his career, he showed tremendous leadership and courage, so I'd like to congratulate him on a job well done," Schell said.

"I'm humbled and honored and it has been a privilege to be in the 55th Wing, to be in the Nebraska Air National Guard and to be the commander of the awesome 170th Group," Hopson said.

STEVENSON continued from page 1.

"You are the right person at the right time to take the position," Bohac added.

Stevenson accepted the flag of command from Brig. Gen. Keith A. Schell, who had served in the position since January 2016. Schell is set to retire from the Nebraska Air National Guard in February 2018.

"Keith served admirably in a variety of positions in the Nebraska National Guard," Bohac said. "Without fail he engaged in everything I asked him to do and engaged in areas where he didn't need to be told to."

Most importantly, Bohac said, Schell was a constant advocate for the Airmen of the Nebraska Air National Guard.

"I am grateful for your service, and on behalf of the Airmen of the Nebraska Air National Guard, thank you for what you have done," Bohac added.

In completing his assignment, Schell thanked the members of the Nebraska Air National Guard for their support, adding that he was humbled to have been given the chance to lead the Nebraska Air National Guard as the assistant adjutant general. He said he has confidence that Stevenson is ready to take the Nebraska Air National Guard to even greater heights.

"To Bob, a friend and hard worker, I look forward to sitting on the sidelines and watching you do what you do best."

Stevenson said he appreciates the opportunity to continue to build upon the work done by Schell and other Nebraska Air Guard leaders.

"Brigadier General Schell, thank you for your diligent and dedicated oversight and concern for the Nebraska Air National Guard during your incredible career and more specifically in your tenure as the (assistant adjutant general)," Stevenson said. "I will try to preserve your legacy."

Stevenson said he was humbled to be taking on his new title and rank.

"It is a little uncomfortable for the focus to be on me because why we're here is really about this organization's people and the role that it plays in the defense and stabilization of the nation," Stevenson said.

Stevenson joined the Guard in 1997 following eight years in the U.S. Air Force. He has flown more than 4,000 hours and is a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said that his career and personal life have shown him the importance mentoring and developing teamwork can have.

"Each one of us can positively encourage and help others," he said. "You never know what one little thing you do will make all the difference that creates your legacy, changes someone else's life and may impact families for generations."



Photos by Lt. Col. Kevin Hynes

Award For Bravery: Tech. Sgt. Philip J. Francis receives the Airman's Medal, Dec. 20, 2017, at the State Capitol for his heroic efforts risking his life to save an injured motorist from a burning vehicle on May 1, 2013, following a car accident near Waterloo, Nebraska.

Life-saving efforts net Nebraska Air Guard sergeant Airman's Medal

By Airman 1st Class Jamie Titus
Staff Photojournalist

Tech. Sgt. Philip J. Francis, a power production specialist with the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Civil Engineering Squadron, was awarded the Airman's Medal for risking his life to rescue an injured motorist from a burning car during an award ceremony conducted Dec. 20 in the Nebraska State Capitol Rotunda. Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts and Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, Nebraska adjutant general, officiated the ceremony which took place as part of the annual National Guard birthday celebration.

The Airman's Medal of Heroism is granted to service members in the U.S. Air Force who distinguish themselves by heroic actions, mostly at the voluntary risk of life, but not involving actual combat.

Francis' award goes back to a serious accident that occurred May 1, 2013, outside of Waterloo, Nebraska. Traveling to Omaha with his wife, Anna, Francis said the weather was unseasonably cold when it suddenly began to hail.

After pausing underneath an overpass to allow the storm to pass, Francis said that they were just getting underway again when they came upon a car crash near a curve. He added that he quickly realized the head-on collision was bad and had obviously just occurred.

Quickly pulling over, Francis sprinted to the first victim and, using skills he had learned through numerous training exercises in the Nebraska Air National Guard, began performing self aid buddy care to treat a woman who was ejected from the vehicle. He then helped rescue another woman who was trapped in her vehicle before ultimately saving a man who was trapped inside another vehicle that had caught on fire.

Francis then continued to assist by loading victims onto stretchers and into ambulances, and assisted the medical team in splinting



Francis Family: Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts talks with Tech. Sgt. Philip J. Francis, Airman's Medal recipient, and his family following a ceremony at Nebraska's Capitol in his honor.

one of the victim's broken leg.

According to Ricketts and Bohac, Francis exemplifies what it means to be a Nebraska National Guard Airman.

"(Tech. Sgt. Francis' actions) just shows why Nebraska is the best place in the world to live," said Ricketts, prior to pinning the new medal on Francis' uniform while members of his family and friends sat nearby. "When we have people like [Tech.] Sgt. Francis, who are willing to step up and put themselves at risk to save another, and it exemplifies the spirit of the Nebraska National Guard."

Later, Francis said he felt humbled by the honor.

"I feel like I was in the right place at the right time," Francis said. "If anyone who's in my unit or in the Guard here in Nebraska or Active Duty, if they had come upon that situation, I feel like they would have done the same thing, but it means a lot to be honored for something like this."

"I would hope that if you were put into a situation where you have to do something like that for someone, your life is just as important as theirs, and if you have the will and the means to help them out, you do that," he added.

Nebraska flag leads way during Virgin Island Veteran's Day parade

By Pfc. Elyse Lyons
Assistant Editor

While in the U.S. Virgin Islands, members of the Nebraska National Guard's 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade had the unique opportunity to participate in the Annual Veteran's Day Parade on Nov. 11 in St. Croix.

The mile-and-a-half parade included all representatives of all U.S. military forces in the Virgin Islands, emergency response personnel, firefighters, police, Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets, and the Virgin Island Army Band.

Leading the parade was Nebraska's very own Col. Craig Strong, 67th MEB commander, and the Soldiers

and Airmen from the Nebraska brigade.

"Before we left Lincoln, (Maj. Gen. Daryl) Bohach had told me 'Take your flag; represent Nebraska and remember where you are from.' So it was in our operations center, in a place of honor, next to the U.S. Flag and the Virgin Islands State Flag," Strong said.

It was a fortuitous thing, too. Just as the annual parade was preparing to get underway, members of the color guard approached Strong and said they wanted the Nebraska flag at the head of the parade. The Nebraska state flag settled right in as one of four flags that led the parade.

Pfc. Audrey Novotny, a human resource specialist from the 67th MEB said that she really enjoyed being able to participate.

"It was exciting because the civilians were super enthusiastic," she said.

Strong said the parade let him and his organization know how much their territorial hosts appreciated the work that they had done since arriving in the U.S. Virgin Islands in mid-October.

"Engaging in a parade made me feel a lot of pride when you had the Nebraska state flag marching at the front in another state's parade thousands of miles from home," Strong said.



Photos by 2nd Lt. Rachel Hofstra

Nebraska State Flag: During a Veteran's Day Parade on Nov. 11 in St. Croix, the Nebraska state flag marched along, waving in the wind along with the U.S. Virgin Islands flag, the U.S. Army flag and the American flag.



March Along, Sing Our Song: Soldiers and Airmen march through the streets of St. Croix during the U.S. Virgin Island's annual Veteran's Day Parade. Col. Craig Strong led the group of Nebraska National Guard members assigned to the 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade that had been serving on the islands in support of Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria relief efforts.

He added that it reinforced the partnership that the members of the Nebraska brigade formed with the citizens of the U.S. Virgin Islands while participating in Hurricane Irma and Maria recovery operations.

"We embrace our role as partners with the Virgin Islands," said Strong. "We were greeted warmly throughout the parade route. Some of the children stood by the route and saluted us as we came by."

The parade marked the transition to the final stability phase of operations for the hurricane mission. Strong said that the mission left the Nebraskans with a lifetime

of memories.

"It was high adventure. Some of the roads have pot holes," Strong said. "There were some stray animals. There were cars to navigate around once we got to the town center. And there were some hair-pin turns."

That all seemed to culminate in the Veterans Day parade, he added.

"On November 11th, I was thinking how there were a lot of disappointed Nebraskans in Minnesota as the Huskers had a tough loss, but the Nebraskans could be proud that their sons and daughters were serving our brothers and sisters in something more than just a game."

CARIBBEAN continued from page 1.

men quickly began working long hours ensuring the various Guard units had what they needed, were located where required and were able to provide support to local response officials. They also quickly found out that part of the job required finding ways to solve problems.

For example, members of the brigade's communications staff were responsible for getting data and telephone services reestablished to the six military facilities that were helping support the Virgin Islands National Guard, said Maj. Carlos VanNurden, brigade communications officer who put off his military retirement so that he could deploy "one last time."

That meant the brigade's five communication Soldiers had to find ways to get satellite communications systems up and running until those sites could be supported by commercial internet again.

The Soldiers also spent long hours to help re-image 250 Virgin Islands National Guard network computers.

"We don't get many of these very often," VanNurden said about the domestic response mission. "The significance of another state or territory asking us for help meant that they really needed our help."

Because the brigade was assigned to the command and control mission, there weren't many opportunities to provide direct support to the people affected by the hurricanes. Still, the brigade did take advantage of those opportunities when they occurred.

For example, Soldiers and Airmen had an opportunity to help clean up two schools, a cemetery, the streets of Frederiksted and part of a town market.

"We went into schools to help clean them up again," said Chaplain (Maj.) Jon Wymer. "Cleaning off desks and putting furniture back into the rooms was an immediate impact that you can see right away. It was so important because we give something up and go away from the people that love us, so we can serve others and you can make a difference by doing that."

Following the deployment, Nebraska National Guard leaders lauded the Soldiers and Airmen for their support, adding that their impact will be felt for many years.

"From now on, every time you



Photo by Pfc. Audrey Novotny

Closing The Gate: While conducting some street clean-up, Nebraska Soldiers reposition a gate which was displaced by hurricanes Irma and Maria after the storms ravaged the U.S. Virgin Islands in September.



Photos by Maj. Carlos VanNurden

Veteran Clean Up: Two Nebraska National Guard Soldiers help clean up St. Croix's main cemetery by replacing headstones that had been moved by the destruction of September's hurricanes. Special attention was placed on cleaning up the cemetery's Veterans section and gathering all of the displaced flags and flowers.

Nebraskans offer helping hands to clean cemetery devastated by Hurricane Maria

By Pfc. Elyse Lyons
Assistant Editor

When the 56 Soldiers of the Nebraska National Guard's Lincoln-based 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade and two Airmen were mobilized to the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of the ongoing hurricane relief and recovery operations, they knew they were going to be responsible for conducting command and control operations for dozens of other National Guard units and personnel from across the United States. They also went hoping they would have a hands-on opportunity to help citizens of the islands recover after sustaining a double-hit from hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Because most of their missions were to be inside the operations center of the U.S. Virgin Islands National Guard Joint Force Headquarters, the Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen had relatively few opportunities to get outside. However, when the brigade operation center stood down for generator maintenance, the Nebraska Guardsmen took the opportunity to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty.

"We took it upon ourselves to do extra missions to help the area," Col. Craig Strong, brigade commander, said. "The cemetery was one of our larger projects."

During the course of a day-long cleanup operation at the Kingshill Cemetery on St. Croix, the Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen said that they paid special attention to the veteran's section of the cemetery.

"I think the Soldiers (and Airmen), as a headquarters unit, like those missions to get out of the building and do some manual labor because you can really see the fruits of your labor," Strong said. "You get to see almost immediate results."

A number of the veterans tombstones had been knocked over or moved, while numerous flowers had been scattered all around the grounds.

The Nebraskans also picked up hundreds of flags from all of the memorials, which they collected and then turned over to a local Veteran's of Foreign Wars group for proper disposal.

"There is nothing more culturally respectful than honoring someone else's dead," Strong said.

This was actually the brigade's second cemetery clean up. Earlier in the year, Strong led a group of 67th MEB Soldiers to Lincoln's Wyuka



Flower Restoration: Lt. Col. Jan Behn picked up flowers that were displaced by the hurricanes. The 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade helped clean up Kingshill Cemetery in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, during their mobilization.

Cemetery where they cleaned up and conducted maintenance on the gravesite of Gen. John M. Thayer, who served as the first commander of the Nebraska National Guard following its formation on Dec. 23, 1854.

Post-9/11 memorial dedicated during somber ceremony

By Lt. Col Kevin Hynes
State Public Affairs Officer

The city of Lincoln came together on a chilly, foggy Veterans Day to dedicate the first monument in honor of those Nebraska service members who have given their lives since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The monument, which was dedicated during a noon ceremony at Lincoln's Memorial Garden in Antelope Park, features the names of 63 Nebraskans who have died in the continuing conflict.

For Gold Star mothers Maria Medrano-Nehls, whose daughter, Nebraska Army National Guard Master Sgt. Linda Tarango-Griess, died in an improvised explosive device attack in Iraq in July 2004, and Joyce Peck, whose son, Nebraska Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Patrick Hamburger, died when his CH-47 Chinook helicopter was shot down in Afghanistan in August 2011, the dedication ceremony was the culminating event of a project they had worked on together for nearly five years.

"Little did we know the events on Sept. 11th would have an effect on Nebraskans," said Medrano-Nehls during the Nov. 11 ceremony. "This memorial here today is in honor of our fallen. For us, it's our children. For others, it's a spouse, a parent or a dear friend."

"Now, with the dedication of this monument, we are assured that their sacrifices will not be forgotten," Medrano-Nehls said. "Their names will forever be in stone."

"We thank you, God, for each and every one of them," added Peck. Along with the names of Ne-



Photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Permanent Honors: On Veterans Day 2017, the Nebraska National Guard helped unveil a monument at the Veterans Memorial Garden in Lincoln which includes the names of Nebraska's fallen service members since Sept. 11, 2001.

braska's fallen, the black and gray granite memorial features the seals of the various military services, an American eagle and the words: IN HONOR OF NEBRASKA'S FALLEN HEROES POST 9-11, 'Never Forget.' It is one of nearly 20 memorials honoring Nebraska military service members that make up the Veterans Garden.

According to the various speakers, the memorial is a much-needed addition to the park.

"So many... so many so, so young, cut off so early by the trauma of war," said U.S. Representative Jeff Fortenberry, who said he keeps a

photo display of Nebraska's fallen since 9-11 in the main lobby of his Washington, D.C., office as a way of keeping the day-to-day business of his office in perspective. "We should never let the constant pressures of the day overcome our proper reverence for those who have so selflessly given for our country."

"So, today, we pause in this important civic tradition to acknowledge our veterans, to honor those who have died, and to celebrate the work that many of you have done to create this new memorial," Fortenberry added.

Former U.S. Senator and Nebraska Governor Bob Kerrey echoed

those comments. "We should remember those who never got to be veterans. Linda never got to be a veteran. Patrick never got to be a veteran," Kerrey said. "There are 63 names in this program who never got to be veterans."

For retired Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, 10 names on the monument have especially important meaning. They are the names of 10 Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers who gave their lives during his tenure as the Nebraska adjutant general.

According to Lempke, few could've predicted the events that occurred with the dawning of a new

millennium in January 2000, which began as an era in which the United States' greatest security threat was "whether our computers would be working the next day."

"America was without a military threat in the world," Lempke said, recollecting on how the fall of the Soviet Union and before the growth of China had left America as the world's lone superpower. "We didn't anticipate what was to come."

"And we all know that 9/11 changed that dramatically and this memorial that we dedicate today honors those who fought and died for their country, their freedom and a more peaceful world," Lempke added. "What's special about them is that many of them did not have to do this. Many of those who entered the armed forces before 9/11 could've easily have ended their enlistments and let someone else carry the burden... but they didn't."

"They stepped up and moved forward rather quickly and then many of them reenlisted to continue," Lempke said, adding that to him, post-9/11 military service members represent "America's second greatest generation."

"They stayed in uniform and elected to fight a new and unconventional enemy," he said.

Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac, who was one of four Nebraska National Guardsmen to serve in major roles during the dedication ceremony, said he hopes the new memorial serves as both testament to the value that Lincoln and Nebraska place upon their military veterans and fallen warriors, as well as a place of healing for those Gold Star families who lost loved ones in the current conflict.



Photo by Lt. Col. Kevin Hynes

Historical Hand-Off: Maj. Gen. Daryl Bohac hands the sword of responsibility over to Chief Master Sgt. Tyrone Bingham, Dec. 2, during a change of responsibility ceremony, taking the state's top senior enlisted position following the retirement of Chief Master Sgt. Douglas Lierz.

BINGHAM continued from page 1.

officer and selected major command chiefs forming the selection board.

"I am humbled that you put your trust and confidence in me to help lead the men and women of the Nebraska National Guard, which I believe is the best Guard organization in the nation," Bingham said.

After the change of responsibility ceremony, Bohac officiated the retirement of Lierz, who had spent more than 33 years serving in uniform.

"You have served with distinction, honor and integrity," Bohac said. "I am grateful for your service and your commitment to the men and women of the Nebraska National Guard."

Lierz entered the Air Force in April 1984 after enlisting into the Nebraska Air National Guard's Lincoln-based 155th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. During the course of his career, Lierz served in numerous capacities, primarily within the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Air Refueling Wing, culminating in his assignment as the sixth Nebraska Air National Guard state command chief master sergeant in August 2016. Prior to that assignment, he served as the 155th ARW's command chief master sergeant.

Lierz is a veteran of numerous deployments in support of such global missions

'I am humbled that you put your trust and confidence in me to help lead the men and women of the Nebraska National Guard, which I believe is the best Guard organization in the nation.'

— Chief Master Sgt. Tyrone Bingham

as operations Decisive Endeavor, Northern Watch, Deny Flight, Joint Forge, Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Lierz also competed on the Nebraska National Guard Marksmanship Team and for the United States All Guard Marksmanship Team from 1989 to 2014.

Lierz said he was touched by the show of support he received throughout his military career.

"It has been an honor to serve as your state command chief," he said. "I appreciate the sacrifices you all make and know you'll continue to serve with honor."



Photo Courtesy of 155th Security Forces Squadron

Island Security: Airmen from the 155th Security Forces Squadron operate a security check point outside of the operating base in Puerto Rico. After two hurricanes struck the island of Puerto Rico, Soldiers and Airmen were called to assist with hurricane recovery operations.

PUERTO RICO continued from page 1.

450 shipping containers into the compound and kept them secure while awaiting distribution," said Senior Airman Sean Pohzel, 155th SFS Fire Team member. "We also conducted armed presence patrols to deter any criminal activity and ensure local residents received vital necessities."

The deployment gave the Airmen the opportunity to see first-hand the devastation the hurricanes caused.

"A lot of houses, vegetation and trees were destroyed," Morrison said. "People were without power for roughly 50 days.

They would come onto base in need of food, water and medical treatment."

It was a very eye-opening and heartwarming experience, he added.

"This was a joint mission," said Senior Master Sgt. David Nelson, 155th SFS superintendent. "We were a small Air Force contingent amongst local police, Department of Homeland Security and all components of the Department of Defense."

"Even though we were only a small part of the whole mission, we feel like we made a difference," Morrison said.



**Veterans
Crisis Line**
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The Veterans Crisis Line connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text.

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Visit the following link for more information on the Veterans Crisis Line.

1-800-273-8255 (Press 1) ★ www.veteranscrisisline.net

Street Talk

“Why is it so important to honor our veterans?”



Master Sgt. Chaz Jensby
155th Logistics Readiness Squadron

“One: They sacrifice a lot, away from family and honoring that sacrifice they gave. Two: Treating people the way I would want to be treated when I retire. I have a lot of veteran family members, which makes it easy to see and recognize that personal sacrifice.”

Senior Airman Timothy Davis
155th Comptroller Flight

“They basically are the ones that got us here today as a country.”



Spc. Danielle Martin
67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade

“They are the ones that paved the way for our military as a whole. We learn from their mistakes or accomplishments and implement them to our training today.”

Pfc. Jon Sronce
Joint Force Headquarters

“Because there is a sense of tradition, that we still follow today.”



Pfc. Richard Piper
67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade

“I believe it is important because they represent our past, heritage, and America’s accomplishments, past and present.”

Senior Master Sgt. Michelle LaFramboise
Joint Force Headquarters

“To show appreciation for their sacrifice and their families’ sacrifice.”



National Guard’s historic ties keys to serving nation, state

(Editor’s Note: The follow commentary appeared in the Dec. 20 edition of the Omaha-World Herald Newspaper)

The Adjutant General

Major General

Daryl L. Bohac



“While our missions and people have changed, our unfailing pursuit to help keep our state and nation safe has never wavered.”

As Nebraskans complete a year-long celebration of 150 years of statehood, the Nebraska National Guard is celebrating two significant milestones in December.

On Dec. 13 the National Guard marked its 381st birthday, harkening back to its formation in 1636, when the Massachusetts General Court in Salem ordered all able bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 to form into militia units.

Two centuries later, the Nebraska National Guard was established on Dec. 23, 1854, when acting territorial Governor Thomas Cuming issued a proclamation organizing two militia regiments, one north and one south of the Platte River.

Over the next 163 years, the Nebraska National Guard has evolved in to an organization our predecessors would hardly recognize today, but would undoubtedly take great pride in.

While our missions and people have changed, our unfailing pursuit to help keep our state and nation safe has never wavered. Today our three enduring responsibilities are the warfight, the homeland and partnerships.

Today’s Nebraska National Guard consists of 3,314 Soldiers and 1,012 Airmen, supported by 244 federal and state civilian employees, serving in facilities in 23 communities across the state.

Our strength comes from our Citizen Soldiers and Airmen who hail from nearly all 93 Nebraska counties, and the families and civilian employers who support them.

Our mission is to prepare combat ready forces and, when called

upon by the Governor, protect the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of the state. We conduct combat operations around the globe; serve to defend the homeland; and, build partnerships here and abroad.

Today’s Nebraska National Guard Soldier and Airman expects to deploy in defense of our nation. This past year four Nebraska Army National Guard units and dozens of Nebraska Airmen returned home from deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, Qatar and other locations around the world. As they returned, three units began deployments to places like Cuba and the Horn of Africa.

We do this with an all-volunteer force willing to go, as they leave their families behind, to do our nation’s work. Their work is dangerous, but you can have great confidence in knowing we have the best trained, best equipped Soldiers and Airmen in the world, and we do everything we can to ensure we bring everyone home.

Wherever disaster strikes, Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen stand ready to serve their fellow citizens.

In 2017 we carried out the longest continuous out-of-state disaster response operation in Nebraska National Guard history.

Beginning in late August and continuing until this month, hundreds of the Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen responded when three separate hurricanes unleashed unimaginable devastation upon Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Nebraskans should take enormous pride knowing their Soldiers and Airmen made a major difference in the lives of those affected.

The Nebraska National Guard is also building important local, national and international partnerships.

We continue to engage with Nebraska educators, governmental organizations and our fellow citizens. We also participated in numerous overseas exercises to strengthen important alliances.

We, along with the Texas National Guard, continue to work closely with our Czech Republic partners – a State Partnership Program effort that will mark its 25th anniversary next July.

Because of these successful global engagements, the United States will continue to be a beacon of hope for the world.

The warfight, defense of the homeland and our partnerships continue to shape the Nebraska National Guard of today and tomorrow.

Yet, our ties to our original militia heritage remain as strong as ever. Just like our forebearers, we are prepared to lay down our plowshares and pick up our muskets whenever our state and nation calls.

We stand with and for Nebraska because we are a part of the fabric of our great state. With our fellow Nebraskans’ amazing support, your Nebraska National Guard continues to be Always Ready, Always There.

Job more than ‘just taking pictures’

My military public affairs career started rather abruptly following a request from my unit readiness noncommissioned officer.

He had simply asked me to take some photos during the 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade’s annual training this past summer at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

This seemed like a great assignment, partly because I had been an editor of my high school yearbook and I had past photography experience through 4-H, so the camera had been a friend of mine for many years. Still, I was hesitant because I had worked in supply most of my military career, and I had no formal photography training.

I was nervous. I wasn’t really sure what was expected. I mean, I was just taking pictures, right? How hard could it really be?

Not only did I think I would “just be taking pictures,” so did everyone else. Comments of “it must be nice to get out of training” were prominent when I first began my “job.”

It was nice to take pictures, and I did fine. I got a handful of really awesome photos, but mostly I was excited to photograph the 67th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade’s first annual training after their transformation.

As the 126th Chemical Battalion went through the gas chamber and the 754th Chemical Company went through a live nerve agent

chamber, I got to capture their experiences.

I was given the opportunity to tell the story of the whole brigade as they really began the tough work associated with their new change.

Fast forward a few months and I found myself as a temporary employee for the Nebraska National Guard’s State Public Affairs Office at Joint Force Headquarters in Lincoln, working with the state PAO, Lt. Col. Kevin Hynes. Under his wing, I learned that this job isn’t just taking pictures. In fact, it is much, much more than that.

This job is about telling the story – your story...my story...our story – of the Nebraska Army and Air National Guard.

I quickly found out I still have a lot to learn about this part of the job. And I mean, A LOT.

This job is about seeing the raw emotions of welcome home ceremonies and then conveying what you saw and experienced to those who weren’t there. Everyone is happy crying, and this job is about capturing that exact emotional moment for years to come.

It is attending countless promotions and retirements to celebrate the long, successful careers of Nebraska National Guard Soldiers

and Airmen, some of whom have been in the military longer than I have been alive.

This job is recording the stories that back up years of military experience.

It is learning who people are both in the Guard and as civilians, and how they balance them both together.

There were many nights during annual training this summer that I found myself looking for a spot to edit photos or write a few notes down. Since then, there have been countless early mornings and late nights covering events, editing photos or finishing up the final sentences of a story.

When I started this journey, I had no idea how much work went into each piece. I also didn’t know anything about the people I would meet and the stories I would hear. I mean, I was just there to take pictures, right?

What I have learned in my short time, though, is that for every story we capture, there are many, many others out there still waiting to be told. That’s why the state’s Public Affairs Office is now working to ensure that every unit has at least one person assigned to document its stories and share them with the rest of the world.

If you are interested in telling your story, or telling your unit’s story, reach out to your chain of command about the unit public affairs representative position, and you can also do more than just take pictures.

Another Voice

Assistant Editor, Prairie Soldier

Elyse Lyons



Nebraska prepares for improved Best Warrior contest

By Spc. Lisa Crawford
Editor

The Nebraska Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition is an annual opportunity for Nebraska Soldiers to showcase their individual skills and talents while competing to qualify for regional and national contests, which, in turn, can possibly elevate a Soldier's career.

Ever evolving, Nebraska's Best Warrior Competition is never quite the same from year to year. A state planning committee annually adjusts the competition to ultimately find the state's one Soldier and noncommissioned officer who can best shoot, move and communicate.

So, it shouldn't come as any surprise that next year's Best Warrior Competition will be different than the 2017 version, which was overhauled from 2016. Probably the biggest change for the upcoming competition is the date, which moved from early March to April 12-15, to position the state-level competition closer to the regional competition in May.

According to the state's senior Army National Guard noncommissioned officer, the changes are all designed to improve the overall competition and the ability of selected Soldiers to compete with their peers.

"I think we have a pretty good product built, especially the support package piece," said Command Sgt. Maj. Marty Baker, state command sergeant major.

For example, the competition used to include more than 80 different support personnel manning each event, but the restructure has cut that number in half and increased continuity within the planning committee.

"We're having a small task force support the entire time, to take a little stress off the battalions especially right before the start of (annual training) planning season," said Master Sgt. Chris Roemig, this year's noncommissioned officer-in-charge.

Planning for the 2018 event kicked off in October. Early on, the decision was made to retain most of the structure from the previous year, while adjusting for minor things based on previous after-action response comments. Roemig said he believes the planning is going well, and he's looking forward to this year's competition.

"Like any military operation, what you don't see is the important part," Roemig said. "There's a lot of planning and effort that goes into it ahead of time, so when it goes off well, that shows good credit to the support staff. The competitors shouldn't have a poor competition because we forgot to plan."

Some of the events from last year which are being retained include hosting a full awards banquet utilizing Nebraska's Army culinary specialists and adjusting the schedule for Soldiers to decompress with a social event Saturday evening before returning home Sunday morning.

Baker said he also hopes to keep scores secret throughout the competition to keep participants motivated instead of discouraged based upon scoring results following each category.

The competition, said one past winner, is definitely a chance for Nebraska Soldiers to begin making names for themselves.

"The competition allows you to show your unit and your state what you are capable of," said Hunter Smith, a senior gunner with Troop



Photos by Spc. Lisa Crawford

Keep Low: A Nebraska Army National Guard Soldier low-crawls through the sand beneath barbed wire during the obstacle course portion of the state's Best Warrior Competition, March 3, 2017, at the Greenleaf Training Site near Hastings, Neb. This year, the state-level contest will move to mid-April, hopefully allowing for warmer conditions and situating it closer to when the regional competition will be held.

B, 1-134th Cavalry Squadron, and last year's Soldier of the Year winner. "And most importantly it shows you what you can do for yourself."

Smith competed in the state competition last March with less than a week's notice to prepare. He said he wasn't sure what to expect, but he gave each event his very best, which ultimately allowed him to win the Soldier category.

Smith went on to represent Nebraska in the Region V competition in May at Camp Beauregard in Pineville, Louisiana. Battling both a knee injury and severe cold, Smith powered through each obstacle and challenge, ultimately finishing runner-up.

"My favorite opportunity from the regional competition was the ability to actually talk to the state (command sergeant major) in a comfortable environment, as a person and not as your boss," Smith said. "The amount of knowledge you can get from a senior NCO like that...you don't usually get when you're lower enlisted."



Career Defining Run: Spc. Hunter Smith (left) and Sgt. Tyler Alberts run two miles during an Army Physical Fitness Test, March 2, 2017, as part of the state's annual Best Warrior Competition. Both Soldiers placed first in their respective categories and competed at the regional competition in May.

said. "It brings good attention to the Soldier, and to the unit for raising and training the Soldier efficiently. You can't just claim to be a competitor or to hold a winning title, you have to earn it."

Baker said he's watched many Soldiers benefit from the Best Warrior Competition, including alums like Sgt. Calvin Koziol who won the state, regional and national competi-

tion in 2016, and Staff Sgt. Luke Katz who won the state competition in 2013 who then went on to graduate from the U.S. Army's Ranger School and then compete twice in the annual David E. Grange Jr. Best Ranger Competition.

"It just opens a lot of doors," Baker said. "When you have your order of merit lists, you take and you reward your Soldiers. Smith went to Air Assault school. By winning the national competition, Koziol was priority for Air Assault and invited to D.C. for a recognition event. And Katz's name is now known nationally among the Best Ranger community."

Baker said the competition also helps with retention by making competitors "Soldiers for Life."

"Every competitor that has won the Soldier or NCO of the Year that I know of are still in," Baker said. "I've said it before that, competition breeds excellence. When you compete because you want to, you are not just going to go through the motions. You're going to strive to be the absolute best."

Roemig said unit-level competitions are in progress now, selecting competitors for the upcoming state contest at the Greenleaf Training Site near Hastings, Nebraska. Soldiers wanting to compete should share their interest with their chain of command.

"This year's competition will be both physically demanding and intellectually challenging," Roemig said. "The goal of the competition is to find a well-rounded Soldier who can do it all."

Roemig, who has been involved with the competition for nearly a decade, said he's watched first-hand the impact it has on Soldiers and their careers.

"All the competitors I've seen at the end of it have been motivated, grateful and pleased with the opportunity to compete," Roemig said. "Even the ones who didn't win come out of it with a positive experience. There is always plenty of camaraderie that's built between the competitors, even across the NCOs and the enlisted."

Roemig said some of those interactions last for years, and the time and interaction winners have with the state senior enlisted leaders is invaluable for networking and potential future opportunities.

"I think it is potentially a large boost to your career," he said. "Maybe not always directly, but it does give you confidence in what you're doing, plus now you've interacted with senior NCOs and got some of their mentorship and guidance as well."

Smith said he believes all Soldiers should consider trying to compete in the Best Warrior Competition for the experience, knowledge and camaraderie that stems from the event.

"This is the best opportunity the state has for Soldiers to put their name out there," Smith said. "It's a gut check for individual Soldiers to see who they really are, and it's a really cool experience most never get to do in their career."

Baker said the state's contest also allows Soldiers to showcase their skills and network on an international level, by competing alongside Czech Republic service members invited to Nebraska as part of the Nebraska National Guard's State Partnership Program with the country.

"It's a great opportunity for our Czech partners to interact with their American counterparts in a friendly, yet competitive environment," Baker said.



Photos by Lt. Col. Kevin Hynes



Helicopter crews honored for overseas, hurricane efforts during Nebraska-Iowa 'Heroes Game'

Members of the Nebraska Army National Guard's Company G, 2-104th General Support Aviation Battalion, received a rousing thank you from roughly 90,000 people, Nov. 24, during the third quarter break of the Nebraska-Iowa "Heroes Game." Earlier this year, the Soldiers returned home from a deployment to Afghanistan where they provided aeromedical evacuation support for U.S. and coalition forces operating there. Following that mission, the Soldiers conducted rescue operations in Texas as part of the Hurricane Harvey relief efforts in and around Houston.

Prior to the game, the Soldiers conducted an aerial flyover salute at the University of Nebraska's Memorial Stadium with three of the unit's UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, which marked the first time in over five years that Nebraska Army National Guard helicopters have been involved in such a mission.