

Prairie Soldier

THE JOINT NEWSPAPER OF THE NEBRASKA ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

Battle of Bismark: One Year Later



One year after Nebraska Army Guard truck convoy caught in bloody ambush near Salmon Pak, Iraq, *Prairie Soldier* pieces together what happened

First of three-part series begins on 10.

Special Report



Guardsman starts first medieval swordfighting school in Lincoln

See story and photos on 3.

Recruiting, retaining top priorities for Guard in 2006

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

As the Nebraska National Guard moves into 2006, recruiting and retention once again head the list of "things to do."

So said Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke in December when discussing last year's mobilizations, restructuring efforts and accomplishments, and the short-term challenges that lie ahead in 2006.

"I think we finally, this year, were able to understand what they mean to be part of what they're calling an operational reserve where the pace of mobilizations and deployments in support of real world missions, wars and national disasters just doesn't decline," said Lempke in December.

"Clearly, the Guard - Nebraska included - is fully committed right now," said Lempke. "And clearly it's probably not a condition we can sustain for a long period of time."

In order to better prepare for future missions, mobilization and short-notice call-ups, Lempke has set recruiting new Guard members and retaining those already in the organization as one his top priorities for the state this year.

According to Lt. Col. Steve Hurst, commander of See **RECRUITING** on 4.

Nebraska civil support team certified as ready, able

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

A unique 22-person Nebraska Army and Air National Guard unit received its federal certification by the Department of Defense in early February and is now ready to provide almost immediate support to Nebraska first responders in the event of a

weapon of mass destruction event.

The formal certification of the Lincoln-based 72nd Civil Support Team comes after 22 months of intense specialized training designed to help the members of the Joint Army and Air National Guard unit prepare for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and high explosive incidents.

"The knowledge that these Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen have about the emergency management system, their expertise in emergency response operations and their technical capabilities can and will provide tremendous assistance to local incident commanders during times of need," said Gov. Dave Heineman during a Feb. 14 news conference announcing

the certification of the unit.

"Ultimately, this unit will help us continue to keep Nebraska's citizens safe and continue our state's tradition of emphasizing preparedness, communication and cooperation," said Heineman.

The 72nd CST is responsible for supporting civil authorities during a domestic chemical, bio-

See **CST** on 9.

Nebraska Army National Guardsman's employer receives national award for support during call-up

By Rudi Williams

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON - Mark L. Kniffen, 41, was overwhelmingly thankful for his employer paying his full salary, allowing him to keep his medical benefits and helping solve family crisis for the 15 months he was in Kuwait and Iraq supporting the war on terrorism.

When he returned home from war, Kniffen decided to show his appreciation for what his employer did for him and more than 100 other deployed National Guardsmen and Reservists. He composed a powerful, glowing nomination letter recommending Eaton Corp. for the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award.

And, to his surprise, the firm was selected as one of 15 winners out of more than 4,000 See **AWARD** on 8.

Guard leaders travel to Afghanistan

By Spc. Sheila Swantek

Staff Writer

Two Nebraska National Guard senior leaders put themselves in harm's way, recently, to better understand what Nebraska Soldiers and Airmen are going through overseas.

In a trip that took them to Afghanistan, Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke and Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk spent nearly 26 hours aboard a variety of aircraft beginning Jan. 8 in a journey meant to learn firsthand about the difficulties being faced there by Soldiers and Airmen as they support ongoing military operations and help train members of Afghanistan's new army.

"We had two main missions for this trip," said Maj. General Roger Lempke, adjutant general for the state of Nebraska. "We wanted to

See **AFGHANISTAN** on 16.



Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk

Surrounded By Friends: Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk (center) poses for a photo surrounded by members of the Afghan National Army during a January visit to Afghanistan. Shunk, Nebraska Army National Guard command sergeant major, and Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, adjutant general of Nebraska, spent several days in early January visiting with Nebraska troops currently serving in Afghanistan.

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NEWS DIGEST

■ General predicts fewer Sunnis ties to terrorists in Iraq

WASHINGTON (AFPS)—Iraqi Sunnis who may have partnered with foreign terrorist groups in the past will abandon that practice because it's against their interests, the U.S. officer in charge of operations in northern Iraq predicted, Jan. 20.

"I think we'll probably see fewer and fewer Sunni organizations aligned with terrorists and foreign fighters," Army Maj. Gen. Thomas R. Turner II, commander of Multinational Division North, told Pentagon reporters during a news conference via satellite.

"The Iraqi people fully realize that the goals of al Qaeda are not compatible with the Iraq of the future that they envision," Turner said.

Turner, who's also the commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) from Fort Campbell, Ky., said his command's 23,000 U.S. service members and 105,000 Iraqi soldiers and police patrol an area the size of Pennsylvania.

Turner said his mission is to find and defeat terrorists and promote stability while preparing Iraqi security forces to assume more responsibility. He noted the combined forces still see organized al Qaeda elements, but have been successful in killing terrorist leaders. The replacement al Qaeda leaders are markedly less experienced and effective than their predecessors, he said.

"It's getting easier and easier to find and capture or kill them," the general said.

■ Guard, Reserve aim to become more mobile organizations

WASHINGTON (AFPS) — The era of the "weekend warrior" is over, the Defense Department's senior civilian in

charge of the Guard and Reserve said Feb. 10.

America's reserve components, consisting of 1.1 million Guard and Reserve members, are restructuring to become more capable of being mobilized like their active-duty brethren, Thomas F. Hall, the assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, told American Forces Press Service and Pentagon Channel reporters at an interview.

This transformation, Hall said, is taking place because of new national security realities that have emerged as the result of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U. S. and the ensuing "Long War" waged against international terrorism.

During the Cold War the reserve components were structured and equipped to perform as a back-up force to active-duty forces, Hall said. As such, he said, Guard and Reserve members of that era were expected to drill one weekend a month and perform two weeks of annual training. Guardsmen and Reservists of that time, Hall added, were also expected to undergo from six months to a year of training before being deployed overseas.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 and the 9/11 attacks changed that, Hall said. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there's no longer a need for a large, relatively static reserve force. And the far-flung war against terrorism, Hall said, has showcased the need for well-trained and agile military forces that can be quickly mobilized for deployment anywhere in the world.

Laws likely will have to be changed to facilitate the transformation of the 21st-century Guard and Reserve force, Hall said. That's because the new-style reserve components, he said, will be regulated, constructed and managed differently from the Guard and Reserve of the

Room With A View



Photo by David Nore

Hang On Tight: Staff Sgt. Brandon Robinson, flight engineer, sits on the ramp of Nebraska's first CH-47D Chinook helicopter as the helicopter flies over the Platte River near Camp Ashland, Neb., during an orientation for Nebraska National Guard officials, Feb. 16. The CH-47 Chinook is the first of an expected six medium lift helicopters that will eventually be stationed at the Nebraska Army National Guard's new aviation support facility at Grand Island. Pilots for the day were Chief Warrant Officers Markus Groetzinger and John Bergman. Additional flight engineer was Staff Sgt. Paul McFarland.

past.

And "you're going to have to look at the contract between the Guard and Reserve," Hall said, noting its members likely will be required to be activated and deployed for up to a year, every six years or so.

Also, efforts will be made to upgrade benefits available to activated Guard and Reserve members to mirror those provided to the active-duty military, Hall said.

■ California Air National Guard unit to get Predator aircraft

WASHINGTON (AFP) — As part of ongoing Total Force initiatives, the Air Force, National Guard Bureau and the Adjutant General of California announced in January that the California Air National Guard's 163rd Air Refueling Wing, March Air Reserve Base, Calif., will become the home for a new MQ-1 Predator Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) unit.

"The unique characteristics that the Guard and Reserve bring to the fight provide economies of scale in experience, stability and cost savings and, as such,

significantly enhance the Air Force's ability to accomplish our Mission. One team, one fight," said Lt. Gen. Stephen G. Wood, Air Force deputy chief of staff for Plans and Programs.

Initial plans include basing the mission at the 163rd Wing, March ARB, with mission flight operations being conducted in the restricted airspace in southern California.

"The Air National Guard's growing participation in Predator operations represents the National Guard's commitment to remain out front in the new and emerging missions of the future," said Lt. Gen. Daniel James III, director of the Air National Guard.

"The California Air National Guard has been actively changing legacy missions into new missions in areas such as Space, Intelligence, and now UASs," said William H. Wade II, adjutant general, California National Guard.

Predators are long endurance, medium altitude UAS systems for surveillance and reconnaissance missions. Since the first flight in 1995, Predators have flown more than 3,000 missions.

Correction

In the December 2005 edition of the *Prairie Soldier* a number of mistakes were made.

♦The late 1st Sgt. Bob Hall was mistakenly identified as Ron Hall in the TAPS section on page 20.

♦The dates of the Air National Guard's "Guardians of Freedom" air show were mistakenly listed as Aug. 22-23 on page 1. The actual dates of the air show are Sept. 23-24.

♦Ronald J. Polivka was mistakenly listed on the Air National Guard's Chief Master Sergeant promotions list on page 20.

We sincerely apologize for the mistakes and any problems or confusions they may have caused.

Rebalance to make Army National Guard more effective, Army Secretary says

WASHINGTON (AFPS) — Rebalancing the types of brigades being added to the National Guard will make that component more effective in its two-fold mission and will contribute to the overall capability of the Army, the secretary of the Army said Jan. 18.

In a Pentagon press briefing, Francis J. Harvey stressed that the National Guard will not be reduced in size, but will simply have different kinds of units added to it.

The initial plan for the transformation of the Guard called for the number of brigade combat teams to be increased from 15 to 34, Harvey said. That is now being changed to 28 brigade combat teams, and the number of combat support units is being increased, he said. This change came about because the Guard has a dual mission, he explained: overseas operational missions and homeland defense missions.

"They need a capability that's somewhat different than the

active component," he said. "So we decided that it's appropriate to adjust the number of brigade combat teams."

The combat support units that will be added to the Guard will include military police units, engineers, chemical specialists, air defense personnel and civil affairs units, all of which are important to the Guard's homeland defense missions, Harvey said.

So far this year, the Guard has maintained a troop strength concurrent with the average 2005 troop strength, Harvey said, but if that number grows, the Army will fund the growth as it comes. This is a new approach to funding that will allow for more flexibility, he said.

"It's really a more realistic approach," he said.

To continue compensating for the Guard's lack of funding in the 1990s, the Army included \$20 billion for National Guard equipment in the Future Years Defense Program, which will

take effect over the next six years, Harvey said.

"The Guard is going to be organized and equipped in the same way the active Army's going to be organized and equipped," he said.

The active Army is also transforming to become more combat capable and ready, Harvey said. In 2005, the Army created four new modular brigade combat teams and one Stryker brigade combat team, and completed the transformation of seven existing brigades to the modular design. Now, 37 combat or support brigades have either completed transformation to the modular design or are well along in the process, he said.

Under the Future Years Defense Program, 30,000 Soldiers will be transitioned out of the institutional Army and into the operational, or warfighting, Army, he said. The jobs these Soldiers leave behind will be filled by civilians.

Prairie Soldier

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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 kevin.hynes@ne.ngb.army.mil. All photos must be high resolution and include complete caption information.

The views and opinions expressed in this newspaper are those of the writers and are not necessarily those of the Military Department of Nebraska or the U.S. Department of Defense.

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Ancient Arms: A bag of wooden practice swords and daggers fill Mike Mercier's bag before the start of a January class in Lincoln.



Moving Into Action: Luna Brunke, one of Mike Mercier's original students, practices an attack maneuver with her wooden practice long sword.

Medieval Defense: Sgt. Mike Mercier (right) demonstrates how to defend against a spear attack while using a long sword. Mercier, dressed as a Medieval Italian swordfighter, has recently begun teaching a weekly class on ancient western European combat skills.

Photos by Capt. Kevin Hynes

Soldier reviving interest in ancient combat skills

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Ever imagine fighting as a Medieval knight? A Nebraska Army National Guard Soldier is doing exactly that for a group of Nebraskans after opening an evening school to teach an ancient and nearly forgotten form of medieval combat.

According to Sgt. Mike Mercier, a helicopter mechanic with Lincoln's Company A, 134th Service and Support Battalion, the idea to open a school to teach long sword and rapier swordfighting began about a year ago, when he transferred to Nebraska from California after his wife decided to pursue a doctorate degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Mercier said his interest in medieval swordfighting began almost by accident while living in California. Mercier said he was attending a local Renaissance fair when somebody slipped a piece of paper into his hand.

"It said something like, 'Learn to swordfight like knights of old,'" said Mercier. "I thought that seemed kind of interesting."

"I'd tried martial arts several times, but it never really clicked with me," he said. After meeting the instructor and learning the basics of historical and rapier techniques, Mercier said he was hooked.

"It just kind of hit me that this is the type of martial arts that I want to do," he said. "That was five years ago."

Mercier said that Medieval swordfighting and Eastern martial arts have a lot in common. "It's no less of a martial art than any Asian one you'll see around," he said. "The big difference

is, while the Asian style has been passed down from master to master, this (style) had basically died off for 200 years."

After arriving in Nebraska, Mercier said he found himself in a difficult situation. Although his interest in swordfighting remained high, he couldn't find anybody who shared his interests. That's because, he said, while interest in Medieval martial arts have grown on the East and West Coasts, it had yet to arrive in Nebraska or other neighboring states.

"When I moved here, I couldn't find any practice partners," said Mercier, who specializes in Italian long sword fighting. "It's not something that's really taught here."

Finally, Mercier said he met Dr. Drew Keister, a family physician at Offutt Air Force Base. "He was the only one around here who knew anything about historical sword techniques," said Mercier. After he talked and sparred with Keister, he realized that the only way he could truly improve his own skills would be to open a swordfighting school.

Called the Nebraska Swordfighter's Guild, Mercier opened his school last June. In order to drum up interest in the school, Mercier said he and Keister held demonstra-

tions at a local Renaissance fair and passed out brochures at local sporting stores.

The school meets weekly—at Lincoln's Pioneer Park during warm months and at a warehouse off of Lincoln's Cornhusker Highway during the cold season — and now has grown to six regular students.

The school costs \$25 per month, with the students supplying their own equipment, which ranges from cheap leather gloves and bamboo practice swords for beginners to expensive steel swords and chain mail armor for the more experienced.

Students are also required to study the written works of Fiore de Liberi, a 15th Century Italian sword master, whose manual, said Mercier, is considered to be the most complete medieval

fighting manual in existence today.

Liberi's text includes drawing and text on wrestling, dagger, arming sword (single-hand sword), long sword (two-hand sword), pollaxe and even mounted (horse) combat.

The school is much more than just learning to swordfight, however, say Mercier and Keister. It also helps students gain a better appreciation of Medieval European history, mathematics and geometry, and promotes physical fitness.

"This is a great way to have fun, but it's also a good physical activity...it helps you stay active," said Keister.

"There's also a real cognitive part to it," he added. "It takes a lot of thought and understanding of history and of basic mechanisms... these skills are applicable across the different schools of martial arts, be it Eastern and Asian or European, because they all have to obey the same laws of physics."

Keister said he's also gained a better appreciation of his own family's history through learning more about swordfighting.

"A lot of us in the States come from European descent. And we've all been taught that the only martial arts are Asian, or at least Eastern," Keister said. "To me, that's the greatest thing about this...I'm learning a little bit more about my heritage."

Mercier's physical fitness skills have also grown since he began swordfighting, he said.

"I've noticed that my speed and agility have increased a lot," he said. "My reaction time has amazingly increased. When you're doing an endurance fight, which may last anywhere from an hour to an hour-and-a-half, you're getting a cardio workout that's just as good as doing a two-mile run or more."

"I've had knee problems in the past, so I can't run all the time anymore," said



Practicing Newly Learned Combat Skills: John Chadwell (left) and "Black Heart" practice sparring with their steel long swords during a February class held at a warehouse in Lincoln.

Mercier. "I do this for a while and I get just as good of a workout."

Mercier said the skills he's learned have an added benefit in helping him develop basic and advanced combat skills that are still applicable today. He's even taught a basic dagger class — which is similar to the Army's new combatant course — to members of his unit during a weekend drill.

According to Mercier and Keister's current students — who range in pursuits from a medical practitioner to a union steam fitter, the school is extremely fun.

"I just love this," said one student, who goes simply by the nickname "Black Heart," one of the school's two original students.

Black Heart said he's spent considerable money buying swords and protective armor since joining the school in June. "It's a chance to learn something really cool, to gain an appreciation of how people fought centuries ago, and then try it out."

"We're always safe, because if you hurt someone, then you won't be able to play anymore," he added. "But there's nothing like the sound of going steel on steel."

For more information about Mercier or the Nebraska Swordfighter's Guild, check out the website at www.mercierarmory.com



Dressed For Success: "Black Heart" sports a pair of protective gauntlets before the start of a class.

New Duds Coming

Nebraska Soldiers to begin receiving new Army Combat Uniforms in September

By Spc. Tegan Kucera

Staff Writer

Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers are being rewarded for how well their state did in recruiting and retention in the form of new Army Combat Uniforms.

According to Nebraska supply officials, National Guard Bureau is rewarding states who did well in recruiting and retention last year by issuing the new Army Combat Uniform (ACU) to Army National Guard Soldiers.

Nebraska, which placed 22nd last year, will be the 22nd state scheduled to receive the new uniforms. To prepare for the uniform distribution, Nebraska units will be recording the sizes of Soldiers in March, according Col. Mike Johnson, director of Logistics. The new uniforms will not actually arrive until September and will then be issued to Soldiers following a pre-determined unit merit list.

"I would rather reward units that are getting their work done by sending them the uniforms first," said Johnson.

The ACU has been around for more than a year, however, this will be the first time that Nebraska has issued the new and improved uni-

form to enlisted Soldiers. Up until now only Army Guard recruiters, senior leaders and those who have already purchased the uniform have been wearing them.

According to those already wearing ACUs, the new uniforms are easier to care for because they do not have to be ironed and the boots do not have to be polished.

In order for all states to get the ACU faster, Guard Bureau is sending two uniforms for each Soldier. After all Soldiers have at least two it will then send out two more.

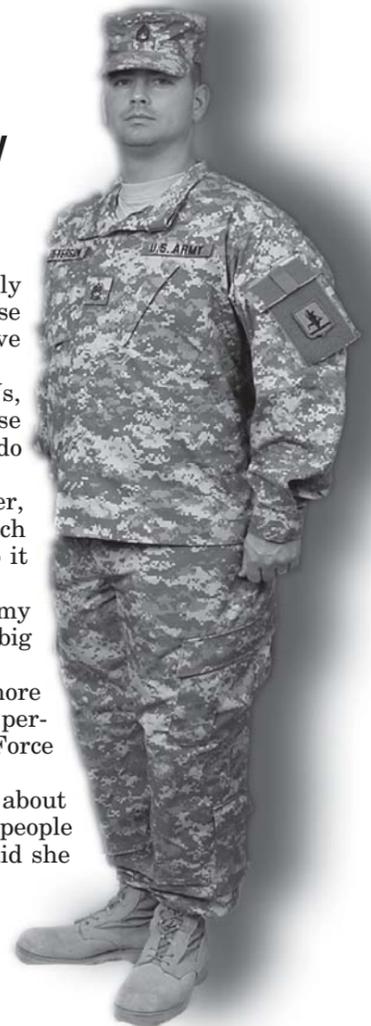
According to members of the Nebraska Army Guard, the arrival of the uniforms will be a big deal.

"I'm excited for it. I think they will be more comfortable," said Staff Sgt. Penny Hytrek a personnel services sergeant with the Joint Force Headquarters in Lincoln.

Hytrek said she was unsure how she felt about the new ACUs at first. However, as more people began to buy or receive the uniform, she said she changed her opinion.

Hytrek has purchased the boots and, by all accounts, is a happy shopper.

"The boots are comfortable. It feels like you are wearing tennis shoes," Hytrek said.



RECRUITING continued from page 1.

the Nebraska Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Command, the effort will take the entire National Guard to be successful.

"Without command emphasis, it makes our job even harder," said Hurst in late January, just four months after taking command of the state's Army Guard recruiting and retention force in October. "What we really need out of Soldiers, out of the state of Nebraska, is for them to give us leads. Without that, we're out there looking for people with no direction."

"When you have people who are already in the Guard giving you names of people who they think would be good Soldiers for the Guard, you're going to get a better product," said Hurst.

Recruiting and retention is clearly not just a Nebraska Army National Guard problem. Nationally, the active Army fell more than 6,000 short of its fiscal year 2005 goal of enlisting 80,000 new Soldiers, while the Army National Guard, Army Reserve, Navy Reserve and Air National Guard all fell significantly short of their year-end goals.

Out of the reserve-components the Army National Guard fell the furthest, enlisting 50,219 new Soldiers, well short of its goal of 63,002. The Air National Guard enlisted 8,859 in comparison to its national goal of 10,272 new enlistments.

In Nebraska, Hurst said, the Army National Guard enlisted 416 new members, falling short of its National Guard Bureau-directed goal of 622. The Nebraska Air National Guard, in comparison, enlisted approximately 90 new Air Guardsmen, which helped keep the organization's assigned end-strength over 100 percent, according to Tech. Sgt. Alden Harriman, Nebraska Air Guard recruiting office supervisor.

Hurst said that Nebraska has always had trouble meeting its national goal, however it

actually made significant headway late in the year.

That trend seems to be continuing, he added, as the first three months of fiscal year 2006 saw Nebraska Army National Guard recruiters enlisting 117 new Soldiers. However, the Nebraska Army Guard has lost 111 Soldiers in that same period to retirements, transfers to active duty and other reserve components, conditional releases and Soldiers ending their membership at the end of their first enlistments.

"As a recruiting commander, we not only need to recruit, we have to retain quality Soldiers and that's up to unit commanders," said Hurst. "We can't out-recruit losses when they're already equal to what I'm putting in."

In order to aid the recruiting and retention effort, the state recently unveiled a number of new Guard Bureau- and Army-sponsored programs and benefits ranging from increased enlistment and reenlistment bonuses to incentives for helping recruiters find eligible and willing applicants.

According to Master Sgt. Ted Guenther, State Recruiting and Retention noncommissioned officer, the state recruiting force has also grown in recent months to its current strength of 34 full-time recruiters and 13 temporary "Global War on Terror" recruiters spread across the state.

"Some of our recruiters are 20 or 21 years old," said Guenther, himself a long-time Guard recruiter. "It's a real learning experience for these young people. They're some of the youngest recruiters we've ever fielded."

In order to aid the recruiters, Guenther said, the state has begun an ambitious, multi-fac-



Photo by Lt. Col. Bob Vrana

New Soldier: Jeremy Cutsor of Lincoln is sworn into the Nebraska Army National Guard, Feb. 4, by Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, adjutant general for Nebraska, during the Joint Forces Headquarters staff meeting. Cutsor was referred to an Army Guard recruiter by Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk, state command sergeant major.

eted program. First, the new recruiters have received substantial training to help them prepare for the challenges of enlisting Soldiers. Additionally, the state's marketing program has been almost completely overhauled.

New radio and movie theater ads were unveiled in early December featuring two current members of the Nebraska Army National Guard talking about the benefits of serving. Internet advertising has received greater focus. New billboards are now located at football fields in Lincoln and at hockey arenas in Omaha, Lincoln and Kearney. Personal presentations are being revamped to give potential recruits and their often skeptical parents better information.

"We've got some great things in the works," added Sgt. 1st Class Matt Hansen, state marketing sergeant. Ads are now airing that feature parents of actual National Guardsmen discussing their fears and pride in their son's or daughter's Guard service.

The Guard is also putting even greater focus on the state college market through a variety of projects.

Additionally, more of the national recruiting advertising campaigns will include more

emphasis on the organization's state missions, said Guenther.

"Guard Bureau is pushing the state mission a lot more, encouraging people to look at what we do at the state-level for our communities (and during) national disasters and things like that," said Guenther.

He, added that the ads focus on the role the National Guard played during the California wild fires and following Hurricane

Katrina and similar storms in Florida.

"There have been a lot of states that have been called up recently to help their friends and neighbors," said Guenther.

Despite all of the efforts and slick marketing plans, Hurst said that this and future years' recruiting efforts will still greatly hinge upon the assistance his recruiters receive from individual Guardsmen.

That's why Hurst said he hopes that recent initiatives designed to pay Guardsmen for each successful recruiting referral they give to recruiters will have a major impact in the Guard.

"As a battalion commander I told all of my Soldiers that they have two choices. You can just let the recruiters put everybody in and never pay any mind or worry to it and you'll take what you get."

"Or, you can get actively involved and look for people you would like to serve with and give those names to the recruiter," he added.

"That's where we're trying to get to. That's what these programs are all about...to encourage people to give recruiters leads by paying them."

He said that the Guard must also do a better job of keeping

the Soldiers it already has. This includes a new program – called the Recruit Sustainment Program – that will help lessen the stress involved during a Soldier's initial transition from civilian life into becoming a fully-qualified Guard member.

Hurst said that he's encouraging unit commanders to be more proactive in reenlisting Soldiers, especially during overseas mobilizations to places like Iraq and Afghanistan, where reenlistment bonuses are usually tax-free.

"(Unit commanders) need to understand going over that they need to keep working on retention," said Hurst. "If they can get a Soldier to reenlist over there for the bonus, that's someone they won't have to worry about when they get back."

"Most people, when they reenlist during a deployment, will choose to reenlist for six years to get the maximum bonus," said Hurst.

Overall, Hurst said, he's hopeful that Nebraska can make a significant turn in 2006.

He said part of that confidence is based upon a recent poll sponsored by National Guard Bureau that showed that the number one reason why Soldiers enlisted in the National Guard in 2005 had changed from benefits to patriotism.

"You'd think that with all the new incentives out there now, that benefits would still be the number one reason for joining the Guard today," he said. "Money's still right up there, but patriotism has overtaken it."

"I think that may be the beginning of a resurgence...of how history maybe repeating itself," he added. "You'd probably have to go back 20 years or more when that was true."

"I think that maybe we're starting to get to a different group of kids who actually want to serve their country because it's the right thing to do."

Big Screen Stars

Nebraska Guardsmen chosen to represent state in national recruiting campaign

By Spc. Katie Loseke
Associate Editor

Two Cornhusker Soldiers were chosen to represent the Nebraska Army National Guard in a new Guard Bureau-sponsored advertising campaign for radio, television and movie theaters.

Sgt. NaTosha Vose, a truck driver with the 1618th Transportation Company, and Sgt. Joshua Harris, a human resource specialist with the 105th Personnel Detachment, were selected to share their individual Guard stories with millions of people across the world who attend movies or click onto the internet.

"It's a little weird, but also cool that friends of mine down in Texas are calling to tell me that they saw my face on the big screen," said Harris.

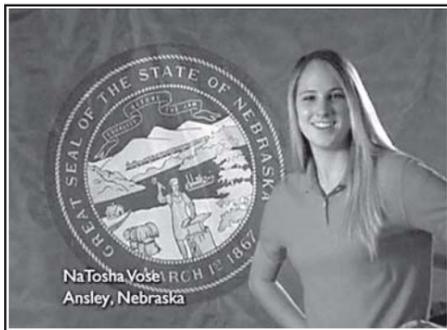
Along with appearing on the big screen, both Harris' and Vose' unique Guard experiences are available online at www.1800goguard.com.

The pair traveled to Washington D.C. in late August to film commercials that are being broadcast nation-wide.

Vose said she had no idea the advertising campaign was going to be this big when she sent in her application last year.

"I thought the program sounded like a neat thing, but I didn't grasp the magnitude of what I'd be doing," said Vose.

Both Vose and Harris said they heard about the ad campaign while working full-time for the Guard last summer. Vose was helping inventory a warehouse while Harris was working at the 92nd Troop Command when they were both ap-



Talking About The Guard: Spc. NaTosha Vose stands in front of a Nebraska flag in civilian clothes at the start of her National Guard recruiting ad.

proached by friends and urged to apply for the program.

The two turned in applications and underwent an interview with recruiters before being selected. The only criteria were that the applicants be members of the National Guard and have served overseas within the last few years. Vose deployed to Kuwait from March 2004 to March 2005. Harris deployed to Bosnia two years ago with the 1-167th Cavalry Squadron.

"During my deployment I was able to find out a lot about myself. It was a life-changing experience that has shaped who I am as a person. I have the Guard to thank for that," said Harris.

Both Harris and Vose said the benefits the Guard offers have been overshadowed by the negative publicity that the war in Iraq has received. Harris said it was that experience that made him want to share his story with the millions of viewers who will see his face in theaters



Proud Soldier: Sgt. Joshua Harris talks about his experience in the National Guard during a national recruiting ad.

and on the webpage.

"It is important for people to see the good side of the Guard. Too often all you hear is the negative side that is portrayed on television by the media," said Harris. "I don't expect a lot of people to run out and join up, but at least they can see what the Guard offers and have a better idea of what we do."

"I just want to show everyone what the Guard has done for me. If the ads change one person's perspective about the Guard, then the whole thing was worth it," added Vose.

Vose said she has grown up with the Guard. Both of Vose's parents are Soldiers in the Nebraska Army National Guard and encouraged her throughout her teenage years to be a part of it.

"I was lucky enough to be exposed to

the Guard life and see firsthand what it had done for my parents. There are a lot of people out there who have not had that opportunity," she said.

Vose said that her story is not unique or special in any way. It's simply a story that many young people can relate to. Vose said she had lived her whole life in a small town and would have never gotten out to see the world if it hadn't been for the Guard.

"The Guard got me out of that comfortable and familiar box that we all surround ourselves with. I've been able to travel and

meet people from all over the nation because of the Guard," she said.

Vose added that her travels have been a great experience and helped her grow as a person while giving her a sense of pride and appreciation for Nebraska.

"I think there are a lot of people out there who are in the shoes I was in. They want to get out, but don't know how. I hope people see my story and can relate," said Vose. "If I can do it, so can they."

Both Vose and Harris said they never thought when they joined that they would some day be the poster-child for the Guard.

"I never thought I would be picked for this, but I'm glad I was. It just goes to show people that the Guard is never done offering opportunities. I went from a normal person to a celebrity all in a matter of months," said Harris with a smile.

Recruiting, retention officials say providing parents with good information key to success

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Make no bones about it, recruiting is a difficult business that has been made even more so by the continuing Global War on Terror and Nebraska Army National Guard unit deployments.

Difficult, say Nebraska National Guard recruiting and retention officials, but not impossible.

In fact, says Lt. Col. Steve Hurst, commander of the Nebraska Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Command, interest in serving in the Nebraska National Guard is still keen.

"I think there's a lot of kids interested in the Guard," said Hurst, who has toured the state's recruiting offices since taking charge of the of the Guard recruiting effort in October. "I don't see (our recruiters) having any trouble talking with kids. And I don't see kids having a problem talking with (the recruiters)...I don't think they have a fear of our recruiters."

Probably the biggest difficulty confronting recruiters right now is getting parents to buy in to their children's interest in joining the Guard.

"One of the big problems we're having right now is parents," Hurst said. "It's a lack

'We want parental buy-in. We're always up front with them. We do let them know that they serve their state and their nation and there's always that chance that they could wind up in a war zone.'

— Master Sgt. Ted Guenther

of communication. Kids are not real good about talking to their parents about the Guard stuff."

"They don't try to explain it to alleviate (their parents') fears... that to me is one of the biggest issues."

According to Master Sgt. Ted Guenther, state recruiting and retention noncommissioned officer who himself has served as a Nebraska Army National Guard recruiter for many years, getting a parent to buy into a young person's decision is critical.

"You could consider it a problem, but yet we want parental buy-in," Guenther said. "We're always up front with them. We do let them know that they serve their state and their nation and there's always that chance that they could wind up in a war zone."

Guenther said that even though the current war has

heightened parental concerns, it's not a new phenomenon.

"I think that what typically happens is that kids, as much as they like to present themselves as autonomous and being their own people, they still go to their parents for the final yes or no...that final decision usually rests with mom and dad," he said.

In order to give parents better information about the National Guard, National Guard Bureau has recently sponsored a series of radio and movie theater spots, one of which focused on the parents of actual National Guardsmen.

According to Hurst, the parental spots, which began airing in December, show parents discussing their fears about having a child join the National Guard and then the pride they gained as that same young person grew and matured because of the experience.

"It was a good commercial that focused in on that they too were concerned for their kids, but it's been the best thing that has happened to them," said Hurst. "It gave a parent's perspective."

"That's probably the biggest thing that (Guard Bureau) has done to try and alleviate the concerns that parents have when they're confronted with a child wanting to join the Guard."

Army's reserve components to remain fully manned, trained, equipped, chief of staff says

WASHINGTON (AFPS) — As current recruiting successes continue, the Army will ensure the reserve-component force gets the full funding it requires, Army leaders told Pentagon reporters Feb. 2.

"To be clear, we have no intention of cutting the number of Guard or Reserve brigades, reducing the number of Guard or Reserve Soldiers or cutting the level of Guard or Reserve funding," Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, Army chief of staff, said.

Rather, Schoomaker said, the Army is intent on building reserve-component units that, like their active-duty counterparts, are fully manned, trained, equipped and led for the missions they'll face in the 21st century.

Widespread media reporting that the president and Defense Department are planning to cut the National Guard and its budget are flat-out wrong, Schoomaker said.

The reports stem from a Jan. 18 news conference in which Army Secretary Francis J. Harvey described plans in the soon-to-be-released Quadrennial Defense Review to transform the Army National Guard (See story on Page 2.)

Initial plans had called for increasing the number of brigade combat teams in the Guard from 15 to 34, Harvey told reporters.

But while the National Guard will continue to maintain 106 brigades, as planned, the breakdown will now be 28,

not 34, brigade combat teams and 78 support brigades.

The change is designed to make the Army National Guard better able to carry out not just its overseas operational missions, but also its critical homeland defense missions, Harvey said.

The combat support units to be added to the Guard include military police, engineer, chemical, air defense and civil affairs units, all important to homeland defense missions.

"Contrary to what some have heard, we are not cutting the number of brigades," Schoomaker said.

The Guard will remain at 106 brigades, 28 brigade combat teams and 78 support brigades of varying types, he said. The Army Reserve will retain 58 supporting brigades.

To ensure proper funding of this rebalanced force, the Army will fund the National Guard and Reserve to their actual strength, but will increase this funding as required as the force grows to its full congressionally mandated strength, Schoomaker said.

The Army National Guard has 333,000 members on the rolls, but is authorized by law to reach 350,000 soldiers, Schoomaker said.

Army Lt. Gen. Clyde A. Vaughn, director of the Army National Guard, expressed little doubt that the Guard can reach its strength goals.

"I can tell you, we're setting all kinds of records right now," he said of the Guard's recruiting effort.

Hastings takes nose in city contest

By 2nd Lt. Camara Minks

Staff Writer

The selection has been made. Hastings, Neb., is the 155th Air Refueling Wing's Community Nose Art City for 2006.

Hastings is the second city to be selected for the community outreach program that began in 2005 when Central City was selected to have its name created in art and then placed on the nose of a 155th ARW aircraft.

"The idea (of the community nose art program) is to reach out to more of the rural towns," said Lt. Col Ken Husted, 155th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron commander and manager of the community nose art program.

According to Husted three towns were nominated by members of the unit for this year's competition. The selection was then made based on the quality of the nomination packages.

"We wanted to see that the people who nominated the town were willing to be a part of the process. For instance, the people who submitted Hastings, already knew some of the principals (of the schools) and city leadership," said Husted. "We could tell by the way they had written their package that they had already made some contacts and would be a big part of the pro-

cess."

Hastings was nominated by Senior Master Sgt. Ken Nauert, 155th ARW first sergeant and 1st Lt. Chris Ganshert, 155th Communication Flight commander.

Husted said it's a year-long process from nomination to the unveiling of the artwork.

"(Nomination) packages are accepted until the end of September for the upcoming year," said Husted. "The first year we kind of did without nominations because we were kind of behind the timeline. So actually (this) is the first year... that we've had a whole full year to do the program and take nominations.

After a city is selected, the committee lets the nominators know that their city has won.

"We give them some information and let them run with it and make some contacts within the city leadership and schools," said Husted.

Once the school and city leadership have been notified, it's time to get the artwork started. Husted said the formal part of the program begins with an assembly where Col. Steve Adams, 155th ARW commander, speaks to the students of the schools involved about the program and its goals "and gets the kids enthused about the art contest that is part of

the program."

The artwork contest is limited to middle and high school age children from the selected city.

No topic is given for the artwork. "We leave it up to the schools and the city to decide what the art should represent," said Husted. "A good starting point that I talk about is if they can think about...the past, present and future of their town. The city leadership is thinking about the future whereas the schools might be thinking more history."

After the students from the four Hastings middle and high schools create their art submissions, entries will be narrowed down in a three-stage selection process.

"We (the committee) said to the schools we would like you to narrow the selections to 25 with a fair distribution from all the schools based on the population or the number of artworks they had," said Husted.

After that, leaders from Hastings will gather with the nominators and the crew chiefs of the target plane to select the best three or four entries.

"Then the crew chiefs will take those to the enlisted council, which will rank those with the winner and then second, third and fourth place," said Husted.

In addition to the recognition,

last year the Central City Chamber of Commerce added a monetary prize to the winning entries. It is likely Hastings Chamber of Commerce will do the same thing, said Husted.

The winning artwork is then digitized and enhanced based on what Hastings and the 155th ARW agree to in order for the artwork to stand out more.

"We did that with Central City and will probably do the same (with Hastings)," said Husted. Additions included adding some words and dates to the original design.

The winning entries will be announced in a ceremony at the school in Hastings before the school year ends. None of the artists will know who has won until that announcement.

Finally, the artwork will be unveiled on the aircraft during the Honors Day ceremony at the National Guard air base in Lincoln in September.

Hastings' nose art will not replace the Central City nose art currently on one of the KC-135R aircraft.

"We picked another airplane, so Central City will stay on as long as the crew chiefs want. We basically said that we'll keep in on the airplane for a year, but I think in all likelihood they'll stay on a lot longer than that," said Husted.

Air Guard kicks off 60th birthday with February ball

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

The Nebraska Air National Guard kicked off its 60th birthday celebration in high style, Feb. 4.

More than 400 people attended the Nebraska Air National Guard Military Ball held at the Embassy Suites in Lincoln.

The ball was the first formal event held by the organization in 15 years.

The Nebraska Air National Guard was officially organized on July 26, 1946, just the second Air National Guard unit in the United States to receive federal recognition.

The February ball included a 50-minute historical documentary produced by Master Sgt. Kent Disney, Master Sgt. Kevin Nye and Senior Master Sgt. Lee Straube of the 155th Visual Information Section, and the ceremonial cutting of the unit's 60th Birthday cake.

Keynote speaker for the ball was Maj. Gen. F. Dexter Tutor from Air Mobility Command.

Guardsmen, Reservists benefit from 2006 Defense Authorization

WASHINGTON (AFPN) — The 2006 National Defense Authorization Act signed into law Jan. 6 provides new or enhanced benefits for National Guard and Reserve members, a senior defense official said.

President George W. Bush signed the legislation Jan. 6, providing a variety of benefits designed to bring reserve-component compensation more on par with what members of the active component receive, Chuck Witschonke, Department of Defense deputy director for compensation, said.

The package provides other benefits that affect all forces, both active and reserve, including better overall compensation and improved quality of life, while promoting overall recruiting and retention, he said. The law also provides a variety of benefits specifically targeting members of the reserve components.

These include:

- Full housing allowance payments for reserve members called to active duty for more than 30 days, versus the previous 140-day requirement;

- Income replacement benefits to help offset the pay loss some Reservists and Guardsmen experience when called to active duty, based on specific guidelines to be established within the next six months;

- Accession and affiliation bonuses of up to \$20,000 for enlistment in the Selected Reserve, and an increase for officers for service in the Selected Reserve, from \$6,000 to \$10,000;

- A bonus of up to \$100,000 for members with a designated critical skill or who volunteer to serve in a designated high-priority unit; and

- Extension of eligibility for a prior-service enlistment bonus to include Selected Reserve members who previously received one.

Witschonke said the new law does not guarantee that all service members will qualify for these pays and benefits, or that those who do will receive the highest amounts authorized. Rather, the law gives defense and service leaders the flexibility they need to tailor the force to meet operational, recruiting and retention goals.

One big change in the new law is a

RESERVE PAY FOR 4 DRILLS															
EFFECTIVE 1 JANUARY 2006															
PAY GRADE	YEARS OF SERVICE														
	<2	2	3	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	26
COMMISSIONED OFFICERS															
O-10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1782.00	1790.72	1827.96	1892.84
O-9	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1558.60	1581.00	1613.48	1670.08
O-8	1102.80	1138.92	1162.88	1169.60	1199.48	1249.48	1261.08	1308.56	1322.16	1363.04	1422.16	1476.72	1513.16	1513.16	1513.16
O-7	916.36	958.92	978.64	994.28	1022.64	1050.60	1083.00	1115.32	1147.72	1249.48	1335.44	1335.44	1335.44	1335.44	1342.20
O-6	679.20	746.16	795.12	795.12	798.12	832.36	836.88	836.88	884.44	968.52	1017.88	1067.20	1095.28	1123.68	1178.84
O-5	566.20	637.80	682.00	690.28	717.80	734.32	770.56	797.16	831.48	884.08	909.08	933.84	961.92	961.92	961.92
O-4	488.52	565.52	603.24	611.68	646.68	684.24	730.96	767.44	792.72	807.24	815.68	815.68	815.68	815.68	815.68
O-3	429.52	486.92	525.56	573.00	600.40	630.52	650.04	682.12	698.76	698.76	698.76	698.76	698.76	698.76	698.76
O-2	371.08	422.68	486.80	503.24	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60	513.60
O-1	322.16	335.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28	405.28
COMMISSIONED OFFICERS WITH OVER 4 YEARS ACTIVE DUTY SERVICE AS AN ENLISTED MEMBER OR WARRANT OFFICER															
O-3E	0.00	0.00	0.00	573.00	600.40	630.52	650.04	682.12	709.12	724.60	745.72	745.72	745.72	745.72	745.72
O-2E	0.00	0.00	0.00	503.24	513.60	529.96	557.52	578.88	594.76	594.76	594.76	594.76	594.76	594.76	594.76
O-1E	0.00	0.00	0.00	405.28	432.84	448.80	465.16	481.24	503.24	503.24	503.24	503.24	503.24	503.24	503.24
WARRANT OFFICERS															
W-5	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	762.68	788.84	815.08	841.48
W-4	443.84	477.48	491.20	504.68	527.92	550.84	574.12	596.76	620.20	656.96	680.48	703.48	727.32	750.80	774.80
W-3	405.32	422.24	439.52	445.24	463.40	484.20	511.64	538.72	567.52	589.12	610.64	619.88	629.44	650.24	671.00
W-2	356.52	376.88	394.72	407.64	418.76	449.28	472.60	489.92	506.84	518.44	528.20	546.76	565.20	583.88	583.88
W-1	314.84	340.60	357.84	369.00	398.72	416.64	432.52	450.24	462.00	472.64	489.96	503.08	503.08	503.08	503.08
ENLISTED MEMBERS															
E-9	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	536.28	548.44	563.76	581.80	599.92	629.04	653.64	679.60	719.20
E-8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	439.00	458.44	470.44	484.84	500.44	528.60	542.88	567.16	580.64	613.80
E-7	305.16	333.08	345.84	362.76	375.92	398.60	411.32	424.04	446.72	458.08	468.84	475.44	497.68	512.08	548.48
E-6	263.96	290.40	303.24	315.68	328.68	358.00	369.40	382.04	393.16	397.08	399.80	399.80	399.80	399.80	399.80
E-5	241.88	258.04	270.48	283.28	303.16	320.28	332.88	336.88	336.88	336.88	336.88	336.88	336.88	336.88	336.88
E-4	221.72	233.08	245.68	258.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12	269.12
E-3	200.16	212.76	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60	225.60
E-2	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32	190.32
E-1 >4	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80	169.80
E-1 <4	157.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

3.1%, 2006 Increase as established under § 1009 of US Code Title 37.

An adjustment under this section shall have the force and effect of law - Released October 11, 2005.

1.5% Increase for Level III and Level V for year 2006.

NOTE—BASIC PAY FOR O7-O10 IS LIMITED TO \$1688.88

LEVEL III OF THE EXECUTIVE SCHEDULE

NOTE—BASIC PAY FOR O6 AND BELOW IS LIMITED TO \$1487.76

LEVEL V OF THE EXECUTIVE SCHEDULE

USD (PERSONNEL AND READINESS)

OFFICIAL

provision that shortens the duty time before a reserve-component member qualifies for the full housing allowance. Reserve and Guard members called to active duty for more than 30 days will now get the full allowance, just as active-component troops do, Witschonke said.

Another benefit, the critical-skills retention bonus, will be "a very good tool"

in helping keep members with important experience and training in the force and in maintaining readiness in high-priority units, Witschonke said.

The 2006 authorization act also increases recruiting bonuses for the Reserve and Guard, Witschonke said. The new law authorizes accession and affiliation bonuses of up to \$20,000, to be offered as needed by the services, he said.

The income-replacement program won't be instituted for six months, in accordance with the law. At that time, specific guidelines and qualifications will be issued, he said. This authority will end in December 2008.

More information about pay and benefits is posted on the DoD's military compensation website at www.defenseink.mil/militarypay/.

Into Egypt

■Nebraska Air Guardsmen experience trip of lifetime during short-notice mission to Egypt for Bright Star exercise

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

A short-notice mission turned into a trip of a lifetime for two Nebraska Air National Guardsmen when they were given four days to prepare for a deployment to Egypt to support a major international exercise.

According to Staff Sgt. Danielle Nuss, full-time technician for the 155th Services Flight, the Lincoln-based unit was received a call from National Guard Bureau officials just days before the September drill requesting immediate help.

"They called us on Thursday (Sept. 8) and said 'We need two people to go to Egypt right away,'" said Nuss.

Nuss said the 155th Services Flight was chosen because of its success during the August unit compliance inspection and other recent overseas missions.

After learning more about the mission, Nuss said, she and other unit officials began calling for volunteers. A number of Air Guardsmen were eager to go, however because of the short-notice nature of the mission, only four were eligible.

"On Friday we found out that there were no military flights going into Egypt, so whoever went would have to go on a commercial flight," said Nuss. "In order to go commercial, the people selected had to have a passport."

Of the four Guardsmen with passports, one was too senior in rank, while another was scheduled to go to a military school. That left Nuss and Tech. Sgt. Greg Strong.

Nuss said she and Strong spent the September drill out-processing from Lincoln, packing their bags and learning more about their new mission.

"(National Guard Bureau) sent us some correspondence from the people in Egypt," said Nuss, a 2000 graduate of Sutton High School. "One of the things they said they needed done was lodging. They also asked if we had any (Morale, Welfare and Recreation) experience."

After a frantic weekend, Sharp and Nuss departed Lincoln on Sept. 12 for a long journey to Cairo.

According to Sharp, a Grand Island native who has spent the past 12 years in the active Air Force and Air National Guard, he knew very little about the mission he had volunteered for. That didn't mean he was totally unfamiliar with what to expect though. Ten years earlier he had spent several weeks in Egypt as an active duty Airman supporting the annual Bright Star exercise.

According to Department of Defense officials, this year's Bright Star exercise was joint/combined training exercise held

in Egypt that involved members of the United States Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and special operations forces, as well as military forces from Egypt and 12 other nations.

Held Sept. 10 - Oct. 3, the exercise was the largest and most significant coalition military exercise conducted by U.S. Central Command this year and, according to a fact sheet, is an important part of Central Command's theater engagement strategy. The exercise is also designed to improve readiness and interoperability while strengthening the military and professional relationships among U.S., Egyptian and participating forces.

This was the first Bright Star to be held since October 2001.

Sharp said he spent the entire trip reading two National Geographic books on Egypt to brush up his knowledge on the country's rich, historic roots.

"I knew a little bit about Cairo and Egypt from being there 10 years earlier," he said. "But Cairo's changed a lot since."

When the two Guardsmen arrived in Cairo, they were met by Bright Star officials who quickly took them to a U.S. Embassy office at the airport, said Nuss. Because of the short-notice nature of the mission, the official at the embassy office hadn't expected them.

"He had to make a bunch of calls," said Nuss. "It was already late, so (the official) said because it's dark, you are not authorized to drive to your base."

Instead, the two Nebraskans were sent to the Cairo Marriott, a five-star resort located on the banks of the Nile River. After arriving at the hotel Sharp found out that he was going to stay in the hotel, while Nuss was assigned to Beni Suef Air Base, located approximately 90 minutes south of Cairo.

Sharp said he had two missions at the hotel. First, he was in charge of coordinating lodging for 300 Air Force personnel who were working at Cairo West Air Base. Second, he was responsible for setting up recreational activities and tours for the Airmen during their off-duty hours.

"We pretty much hit the ground running," said Sharp. "I had to basically make sure that they had force protection at the resort and that the people staying there remained in lockdown except when they were on tours."

Sharp said that there was plenty for people to do at the hotel, including restaurants, swimming and shopping. However, after a few weeks people were becoming restless.

"They wanted tours," said Sharp, who has had some experience in coordinating recre-



Photo by Capt. Kevin Hynes

Back From Egypt: Tech. Sgt. Greg Sharp and Staff Sgt. Danielle Nuss, 155th Services Flight, pose for a photo near the Nebraska National Guard air base mall shortly after returning to Nebraska from a deployment to Egypt for several weeks in support of an international military exercise.

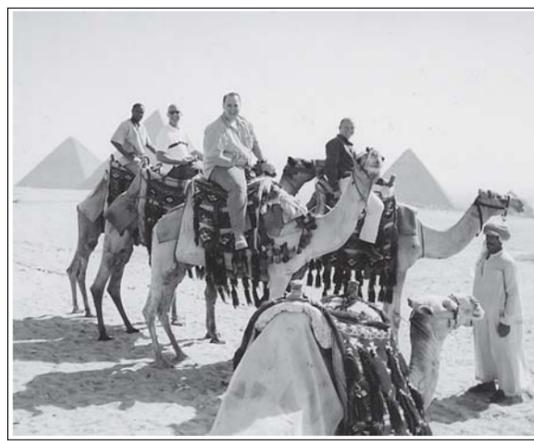


Photo courtesy of Tech. Sgt. Greg Sharp

Desert Transportation: Tech. Sgt. Greg Sharp (center) and other American military members prepare to attempt to ride camels during a morale, welfare and recreation trip to the Giza Pyramids, one of several trips Sharp was responsible for coordinating.



Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Danielle Nuss

Keeping A Base Running: Staff Sgt. Danielle Nuss with co-worker Airman 1st Class John Merriman at her office in Egypt where Nuss was responsible for maintaining the sign-up list for morale phones and computers, and coordinating lodging issues.

ational trips during previous deployments. "So I set up four of them."

Sharp said he set up tours of the Sphinx and the Giza Pyramids, the Egyptian Museum as well a Nile River Cruise. Tour preparations included setting up an itinerary, working with the Egyptian Secret Service to ensure security and contracting with pre-approved Egyptian travel agencies.

"Someone from the hotel security would go with us along with a member of the Egyptian Secret Service just to keep us out of crowds and lines," he said. "When we would go somewhere, we would go straight to the front of the line and the security agent would get us right through... it was kind of nice."

Nuss, on the other hand, experienced a completely different mission. After spending a night at the hotel, she and six other military members drove to the Beni Suef Air Base located on the banks of the Nile River. Nuss said she was happy to escape the confines of the hotel.

"I really don't like staying in a hotel because if you go to a real base you get a better experience of meeting people, hanging out and feeling like you're in the Air Force," she said.

Beni Suef, said Nuss, was a tiny base that's only used during exercises. There, around 300 people were working to support the on-going exercise.

One of Nuss' first jobs was to coordinate lodging for all of the people on base, ranging from members of the American Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps, to members of the Jordanian

Air Force. Nuss said that most people were housed in tiny huts called "villas," which had a living room, kitchen and two bedrooms with three cots each.

"It was kind of hard to do the lodging because I got there for the last two weeks of the exercise," she said. "I pretty much had to go with whatever they had set up already."

"They had a spreadsheet with all of the villa numbers and names on it," she said. "We had to make sure that it was accurate. When I got there, it was about 50 percent accurate. By the time I got done, it was about 98 percent."

Nuss said maintaining accountability of people stationed on base was extremely important. "We needed to know where everyone was at in case there was an emergency," she said. "We also had to make sure that everyone was accounted for when the exercise concluded so we didn't leave someone behind."

Along with lodging, Nuss also coordinated MWR functions. This included setting up a tour to a local pyramid, coordinating several pool, card and foosball tournaments, and overseeing the telephone and computer cafes.

"We had five computers and four phones for all of these people," she said. "Our job was to sign them out for 15 minutes at a time."

"It was busy all of the time," she added. "I worked the night shift and there were people standing in line, waiting to go in throughout the night."

Nuss said the MWR functions served an important need. "A lot of these people had

been there for several months," she said. "They hadn't been able to leave base. They were bored out of their minds...and when you get bored people, that's when you start having problems."

"We provided them with sanity," Nuss said. "Plus, it helps out with retention. If people go on a deployment for four months and have nothing to do and have a horrible time, do you think they're going to stay in the Air Force? Now, if they go on a deployment and have a lot of fun, they're going to sign up for another deployment."

Sharp agreed. "It was very important to everybody there," he said. "They weren't allowed outside of the hotel, otherwise."

Along with their lodging and MWR functions, Nuss and Sharp also had the opportunity to work in another important part of their functional areas when a lieutenant was killed in a car accident at Beni Suef.

"We had to arrange escorts back to Ramstein Air Force Base (Germany) and an honor guard from people there," said Sharp.

Both Nuss and Sharp said they enjoyed their deployment to Egypt, despite all the work they had to do to get there.

"I got to see a country I wouldn't have got to any other way," said Nuss. "I got some good experience in MWR and setting up tournaments. And meeting people from different areas is always a rewarding part of a deployment."

"I got to see one of the wonders of the world," added Sharp. "Overall, I met a lot of nice people. The Egyptian people were great...I had a great time."

Air Guard assists other units through aircraft modification

By 2nd Lt. Camara Minks
Staff Writer

After becoming the first Air National Guard refueling unit to have its aircraft modified with a new communications and navigation system, member of the 155th Air Refueling Wing are now stepping to the forefront of the Guard in another way as they help other refueling units transform to the system.

According to Lt. Col. Keith Schell, 155th ARW executive officer, the Nebraska Air Guard unit worked hard to complete the modernization of its KC-135R Stratotanker fleet to the new "Block 40" modification and the addition of the Communication, Navigation, Surveillance/Air traffic management (CNS/ATM) system. The system was formerly known by the acronym GATM, which stood for Global Air Traffic Management.

"What the new CNS/ATM system had done for us is we now have datalink capability where the aircraft, via satellite, reports its position periodically or on demand by the controller. So, we no longer have to make the radio position report," said Schell.

This allows more aircraft to fit into the same air space, which is very important in crowded flying areas such as the northeastern United States, Pacific area countries and Europe, said Schell.

Along with being the first Air Guard KC-135R unit – and only second in the Air Force – to switch to the new system, the 155th ARW was also the first unit to become completely operational with its modified aircraft.

"We were the first Air Force platform (airplane) to be certified and trained in the Pacific and the north(east)," said Lt. Col. Bob Stevenson, 173rd Aerial Refueling Squadron operations officer.

Since the systems were new, a revised training program had to be developed for aircrews to become proficient in using the CNS/ATM. Members of the 155th ARW solved this challenge by developing new training modules for flight and maintenance crews.

"We developed, designed and ex-

ecuted a training program that had never been done before... (to) take E-model Block 30 crews and train them in the R model block 40 all at the same time," said Stevenson.

Previously air crews were trained from the E-model to R-model aircraft and then from the Block 30 to Block 40 modification.

"We combined the two into a single training program," said Stevenson.

155th ARW communication and navigation personnel have offered their expertise to other units as well.

"We communicate with other units for training requirements. In some cases units request the opportunity for hands-on training and we provide that," said Senior Master Sgt. Gene Trausch, Avionics Element supervisor.

So far two units have come to Lincoln for CNS/ATM training in guidance and control, and avionics, said Trausch. Other units have contacted the unit's avionics section for possible future training as they receive their newly modified aircraft.

"We are the lead unit for this change," said Master Sgt. William Rowell, Communication/Navigation Shop chief.

Rowell said that being the lead unit means the avionics section has helped review technical manuals and procedures to fix and upgrade the new systems.

"We review (Time Compliance Technical Orders) and advise the writers of changes," said Trausch. "This helps other units avoid difficulties and problems with their CNS/ATM systems."

Lincoln communication and navigation technicians also talk frequently with the software engineers about difficulties with the CNS/ATM systems, especially when the system upgrades cause other aircraft systems to work incorrectly. As a result, the 155th ARW has become a model for other bases.

"The Air National Guard in Washington (D.C.) looks to us as the CNS/ATM experts in the Guard," said Stevenson. "The training load is heavy for the active duty and... we are in a position where we are trying to help alleviate some of that for them."

Air Guard flight crews volunteer to help out active duty Air Force

By Staff Sgt. Matt Boring
Staff Writer

Quick quiz: What happens when Air National Guard crew members are combined with active duty aircraft?

The answer: The same thing if a person were to combine active duty aircrews with their own aircraft.

Members of the Lincoln-based 155th Operations Group have actually been proving this quiz true when, starting last fall, Nebraska Air National Guard aircrews began volunteering to fly active duty aircraft around the world in support of a wide variety of operations.

That's a pretty dramatic departure from the recent past when Air National Guardsmen rarely worked quite this closely with their active duty counterparts.

According to Nebraska Air National Guard officials, the fact that members of the 155th Operations Group have been able to merge so easily with their active duty counterparts is proof that the Total Force is alive and well with parts that really are interchangeable.

"That is the goal of the Total Force—the fact that it is a plug and play," said Lt. Col. Dennis Hayward, commander of the 155th Operations Support Flight.

Hayward said that traditionally, active duty Air Force members deploy as a unit, fly and maintain their own aircraft, and rotate members in and out within the unit.

However, as the operational tempo continues to be extremely high, active Air Force units are being forced to keep many of their members in theater for extended periods of time.

"The active Air Force is currently doing a 60-day on, 60-day off rotation," said Hayward.

The stress of flying in combat zones, coupled with refueling large amounts of fighters and transport aircraft was leading to many crews getting "burned-out," said Hayward, adding that burned-out crews can become a

liability. The frequency of accidents increases with fatigue and extreme levels of stress—regardless of training.

That's where the Guard stepped up to the plate.

In an effort to relieve active duty crews that were overworked, National Guard Bureau issued a nation-wide appeal for volunteers. Soon, members of the Nebraska Air Guard were raising their hands to help out.

Hayward said many of the volunteers felt the shorter deployment (30-60 days) was an ideal way to both exhibit patriotism and maintain commitments they have as civilians.

Additionally, flying missions nearly every day, Air Guard crew members, both young and old, are gaining valuable experiences that might not have been available serving as a traditional Guard member.

These experiences include traditional missions such as aerial refueling and supplemental roles transporting supplies and personnel.

Hayward said that since the operation began, members of the 155th Operation Group have flown missions throughout the Middle East and Europe, and even back to the States.

According to Chief Master Sgt. Dwight Morehead, supervisor of the 155th Operations Group's boom operators, the experience gained from combat conditions and the sheer amount of flight time have been invaluable.

"There may be times when there are 10 or 12 fighters waiting to be fueled," he said. That kind of demand enables crew members to hone their skills and work out any kinks, he added.

While the current effort is new, the spirit of volunteerism is not, said Hayward.

"As a unit we were very lucky we were not activated for Kosovo. We did it all through volunteerism," said Hayward. "Additionally we did not activate as a unit after 9/11 because we had enough volunteers."

"We've never had to have a unit deployment, so I see the volunteerism as a great way to do business," he said.

AWARD continued from page 1.

nominations for the prestigious award.

Kniffen, a staff sergeant in the Nebraska Army National Guard, said he put things in the nomination letter that he thought would get Eaton selected for the award.

"I was surprised that they won the award, but I figured that they had a pretty darn good chance at it when I nominated them," he said. "I don't think there's another company in the world that supports their employees as well as Eaton does."

"I just can't put into words how they made me feel so wanted — part of the company," Kniffen said. "They paid us for 40 hours per week while we were gone, with no questions asked. We were also allowed to keep our insurance benefits. We got much more than we expected."

Eaton, with more than 59,000 employees serving customers in more than 125 countries, currently has about 110 employees on active duty in the Guard and Reserve. Boasting sales of more than \$9.8 billion, the company has had more than 425 employees mobilized in the past four years, according to company officials.

Not only did Eaton pay the Citizen-Soldier's full salary and

allow his family to keep their medical benefits, the firm also put out boxes for employees to fill with personal items and goodies to send to the troops in Iraq.

"They got so much stuff the first time they put the boxes out that they had to store half of it in a closet for the next box," said Kniffen, a native of Kearney, Neb. "Getting the boxes in Iraq was like having another friend."

"Just to get that little extra support was kind of like a kid in the candy store or a kid getting a Christmas stocking full of goodies," said Kniffen, whose wife, Cyndi Stump-Kniffen, also works at Eaton. "It was just so nice."

He said Eaton also kept its deployed employees abreast of what was going on with the company.

"They also supported us with letters and e-mails," he said. "They supported our families back home by staying in touch with them, finding out how they were doing. If a crisis at home showed up, like somebody need-



Photo courtesy of Eaton Corp.

Back At Work: Nebraska Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Mark L. Kniffen, 41, a valve press operator, nominated his employer, Eaton Corp., for the Secretary of Defense Freedom Award, which it received in October 2005.

ing washers and dryers, a car fixed - (Eaton employees would attend to) the little things I couldn't do while I was gone."

Kniffen left for Iraq on March 22, 2004, and came back a year later. While in Iraq and Kuwait, he was a truck driver with Company B, 734th Transportation Battalion (Motor Support). He said his unit provided force protection in Kuwait and Iraq, which included distributing everything that came into or went out of those — from food to water to replacement parts.

Kniffen said employers who support their workers will have better employees. Another Eaton employee, Judy L. Altmaier, agreed.

"Eaton Corporation has policies in place to support our employees when they are called to active duty to protect our country and the freedoms we enjoy," Altmaier said. "I'm proud to work for a company that values its employees and has a program such as this to demonstrate it."

"I am also very proud of Mark Kniffen and all of the Eaton employees who have actively served or are serving in any capacity," she said.

Kniffen said the company he worked for 18 years before being hired at Eaton didn't offer the support he's found at Eaton. "It's just the fact that Eaton cared, supported us and they wanted us to come home," Kniffen said. "You have no control when you're overseas in a war zone. You're homesick every day, but you learn to deal with it. You work long hours so

that kind of kills most of the day."

Eaton's senior leadership personally emphasizes family support with an Eaton family services coordinator, who provides excellent support and assistance to families of mobilized employees, Kniffen said.

Eaton is a diversified industrial manufacturer, involved in areas ranging from hydraulic systems to factory automation and engaged in a host of product development.

The company was recognized in an October 2005 ceremony in Washington as one of America's most supportive employers who make it possible for the nation to call upon the Guard and Reserve in response to natural disasters at home and to fight the war on terrorism, DoD officials said.

The Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award was established in 1996 to recognize outstanding efforts on the part of employers who support their National Guard and Reserve employees.

The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve is a DoD organization established in 1972 to gain and maintain active support from all public and private employers for the men and women of the National Guard and Reserve.

Two more Army Guard units mobilizing for overseas duty

By Lt. Col. Bob Vrana
State Public Affairs Officer

Two more Nebraska Army National Guard units have been informed that they will soon be mobilizing for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The mobilizations affect approximately 150 Soldiers from the Lincoln-based 24th Medical Company (Air Ambulance) – which is being reorganized into Company C, 135th General Support Aviation Battalion – and the Kearney-based Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 734th Transportation Battalion.

According to Nebraska Army

National Guard officials, the 24th Med. Co. will mobilize in mid-March for several months of training at Fort Hood, Texas, before finally deploying overseas. The unit's final destination is not being released at this time.

The mission of the 24th Medical Company is to provide UH-60 Black Hawk medical evacuation to U.S. and coalition forces. The unit is commanded by Maj. Richard Gray of Lincoln.

This is the fifth mobilization of the unit since 1990. The 24th Medical Company served in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Bosnia in 1999, Egypt in

2002, Kosovo in 2003, and supported Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in 2005.

Due to a re-organization the unit will be re-designated as Company C, 135th General Support Aviation Battalion prior to its mobilization. The 135th GSAB headquarters is located in Aurora, Colo.

HHD, 734th Trans. Bn., will mobilize in late-May for final pre-deployment inspections of administrative records, individual and unit equipment.

The Soldiers are then expected to deploy to their mobilization station at Camp Atterbury, Ind., where they will receive post-mobilization train-

ing prior to their overseas deployment. The unit's final destination is not being released at this time.

HHD, 734th Trans. Bn., provides command and control of U.S. Army units engaged in all types of motor transport operations. This includes command and control of U.S. Army cargo transfer companies.

This marks the second time that HHD, 734th Trans. Bn., has been mobilized for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The unit was mobilized in early 2003 for the then-planned "northern front" invasion of Iraq from Turkey. When that operation was called off after the Turkish

Parliament voted to not allow American and Coalition forces to springboard from Turkey, HHD, 734th Trans. Bn., was caught in limbo and remained at Fort Riley, Kan., until being demobilized in mid-May 2003.

The unit is commanded by Lt. Col. Matthew Parsley, of Scottsbluff.

The mobilizations will bring the total number of Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers currently mobilized to 870, which is 26 percent of the total Nebraska Army Guard force. More than 73 percent of the force remains available for homeland defense or other emergency response duties.

Capitol Display:

Trucks and trailers belonging to the Nebraska National Guard's new 72nd Civil Support Team line up in front of the State Capitol's north steps, Feb. 14, during a press conference to announce the federal certification of the Lincoln-based unit.



CST continued from page 1.

logical, radiological, nuclear, explosive incident by identifying agents and substances, assessing current and projected consequences, advising the incident commander regarding response measures and assisting with appropriate requests for additional state support.

The 72nd CST is the 33rd such unit in the United States. A total of 55 are planned, with a CST stationed in every state and territory in the country.

Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, adjutant general for Nebraska, said that in order to become certified, the unit's members had to undergo a tremendous amount of training.

"The 72nd Civil Support Team has been on a very fast track since March 2004 when DoD announce that Nebraska would be one of 12 states to receive this capability," said Lempke.

For example, each of the members of the unit received, on average, 550 hours of training, with the nuclear medical science officer receiving approximately 860 hours of training ranging from basic chemistry to the study of polymerization chain reactions, said Lempke.

"In less than 18 months, the unit completed all individual and group training, passed a strenuous training and evaluation exercise, and submitted the paper work to become mission validated," said Lempke.

According to Lt. Col. Anita Curington, commander of the new unit, officials conducted more than 200 individual interviews in order to select the members of the 22-person unit.

The unit is equipped with eight vehicles and three trailers filled with state-of-the-art military and commercial detection equipment ranging from a satellite communications vehicle to a mobile detection lab, the only one of its kind in Nebraska.

"We are now ready to assist

local and state first responders to keep Nebraska safe," said Curington.

According to Lempke, the unit will now fill a particularly important need in the state.

"Where a CST comes in is (during an event) where you really don't know what happened. You don't know what's there," said Lempke. "It's particularly important when you may have lives at stake."

Members of the CST are on-call 24 hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week. The unit is required to respond to any calls for assistance within 90-minutes of notification, said Curington.

Once on scene, the unit can be up and operating in less than an hour. That response can range from sending specially trained and equipped specialists into a possible "Hot Zone" to collect material for analysis, to actually making a preliminary assessment of potentially dangerous material by the unit's mobile lab.

"Based upon what type of sample is received and what type of situation you've got – be it chemical, biological or radiological – for the most part analysis can (be completed between) one hour to three hours," said Capt. Eric Kremers, unit nuclear medical science officer.

Prior to the certification of the 72nd CST, such preliminary analysis would've taken much more time because material had to be packaged and sent to the closest certified civilian laboratory.

"Getting that quick analysis becomes very important when you're talking about that risk to life and limb," said Lempke. "That's the capability that this unit brings."

Following a preliminary analysis, said Curington, unit specialists can then tell incident commanders what type of situation they're dealing with and give them advice on how to treat casualties while minimizing risks to others.

Access to quick and correct



Photos by Capt. Kevin Hynes

Briefing The Bosses: (Right) Sgt. Thomas Smith, 72nd Civil Support Team, shows off his protective Level A suit to Gov. David Heineman (center) and Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke (left) at the State Capitol following a press conference announcing the federal certification of the new Guard unit.



State-of-the-Art Equipment: (From left) Staff Sgt. Samuel Malone and Staff Sgt. Tom Lannin of the Nebraska National Guard's new 72nd Civil Support Team, make adjustments to a satellite dish atop the unit's communications vehicle, Feb. 14, on the north steps of the State Capitol in Lincoln. The 72nd Civil Support Team is responsible for providing state and local first responders with assistance in analyzing material following a Weapons of Mass Destruction attack.

information, said Heineman is particularly important for leaders during a major WMD incident.

"We're going to be asked to make some very timely and very critical decisions when these incidents occur," said Heineman.

"In order to have this timely response... (it) will very valuable and very important."

According to Lempke, CSTs have already received real world tests. For example, following the Space Shuttle Columbia disas-

ter, CST from around the country were sent to help deal with the destroyed shuttle's remaining hazardous material. CSTs – including members from Nebraska – were also sent to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina to help emergency management officials set up communications systems and to identify hazardous pollutants.

Right now, said Curington, a CST can only be used during domestic situations. However, law makers are currently con-

sidering a change that would allow CSTs and personnel to be used during certain international incidents.

"Certainly, there are situations where the training and equipment that they have is valuable," said Lempke. "(The CST implementation program) started as a strictly continental United States (asset.) Now we're looking beyond our borders."

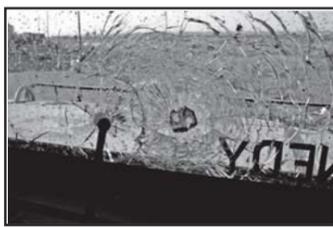
Lempke said that nationally, CSTs are important resources the Guard is providing to state governors.

"The National Guard is the only dual-rolled service component," said Lempke. "Most publicity is about our role in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq. Often less visible but still significant is our mission to support the governor in insuring the safety of Nebraska citizens."

Heineman said he appreciates the work and sacrifices of all National Guardsmen – be it during federal missions overseas or during state emergencies.

"I am proud of the 72nd and all Nebraska Guardsmen," he said. "These brave Citizen Soldiers continue to advance the War on Terror. They continue to make difficult sacrifices for the greater good."

"I'm grateful for their service and I am confident that our state is better off because of them."



Photos courtesy of Staff Sgt. Steve Harris

Battle Of Bismark: A line of civilian and military trucks sit jammed up near a destroyed bus on Alternate Supply Route Bismark near Salmon Pak, Iraq, on March 20, 2005, at the height of the ambush of Convoy 678. Driving the military trucks were members of the Nebraska Army National Guard's 1075th Transportation Company from York and Columbus. (Top) Photos show the aftermath of the Battle of Bismark, during which four members of the 1075th Transportation Company were wounded.

Three-part special report attempts to piece together what happened during 2005 battle near Salmon Pak, Iraq

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Shortly before noon on March 20, 2005, a convoy of trucks under the command of the 1075th Transportation Company, a Nebraska Army National Guard company from Columbus and York, was ambushed by a large Iraqi insurgent force near a hardscrabble suburb of southeastern Baghdad known as Salmon Pak.

During the nearly 45-minute battle that followed, members of several National Guard units including 14 Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers, successfully fought the larger and better armed insurgent force to a standstill, and ultimately defeated them.

The results of the savage battle were telling. Four 1075th Transportation Company Soldiers were wounded in the action while 26 enemy insurgents were killed and eight captured. Dozens of weapons – including rocket propelled grenade, assault rifles, machine guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition were seized. Four 1075th Soldiers would later be awarded Bronze Stars for Valor.

Yet, for the most part, the actions of the Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers involved in the battle that day have largely gone unnoticed and in some cases forgotten.

Instead, much of the nation's attention focused on the actions of the relief force led by members of the Kentucky Army National Guard's 617th Military Police Company, which succeeded in finally defeating the insurgents. Those Soldiers became the heroes of the battle – at the time the largest defeat of an insurgent force since the Battle of Fallujah in late 2004. They also subsequently received the majority of the subsequent media attention and post-action awards, including the first Silver Star presented to a female Soldier since World War II.

For nearly a year, the *Prairie Soldier* has attempted to piece together the story of the Battle of Bismark in an effort to understand what happened, why it happened and the lessons to be learned.

In the course of the special project, as many questions have emerged as answers. Yet, many themes have remained true. The Battle of Bismark was truly a Citizen Soldiers' battle during which Guardsmen overcame the initial confusion and fear of the battle and ultimately found the courage to do truly remarkable things.

In this, the first of a three-part special report, the *Prairie Soldier* looks at the factors that affected the March 20 battle as well as the opening moments of the ambush itself.

Under Fire

Nebraska drivers played critical role during Battle of Bismark

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Something just didn't seem right...or rather out of place.

Those were the thoughts that filled Spc. Jacob D. Graff's mind as he navigated his huge armored semi-truck through an Iraqi checkpoint just south of Baghdad near a notorious, dusty town called Salmon Pak shortly before noon on March 20, 2005.

There, sitting next to the highway checkpoint was a tough-looking Iraqi Soldier.

"The first thing that caught my eye – it caught everybody's eye – was there was an Iraqi National Guardsman sitting there with a (rocket propelled grenade)," said Graff, a member of the Nebraska Army National Guard's 1075th Transportation Company. "That was the first time that I'd ever seen one."

As Graff moved his truck through the checkpoint, he said he tried to shake the thoughts from his mind.

Heck, he'd seen a lot of strange things on these Iraqi roads since he and other members of Nebraska 1075th Trans. Co. – a unit split between Columbus and York – had begun conducting convoys to

First of a three-part
Special Report

various American and Coalition bases across Iraq, a country roughly the size of Texas.

Located at about the center point of a 33-vehicle convoy that had departed Kuwait a day earlier, Graff said he tried to refocus his mind on the job ahead. Music filled the truck cabin Graff shared with his co-driver, Spc. John Harris of Columbus, as he floored the truck's accelerator to catch up with the convoy ahead of them, a mixture of armored Soldier-driven "green trucks" and Humvees, and unarmored civilian-driven "white trucks."

Graff and Harris were both keenly attentive. They'd just entered one of the more difficult portions of their journey north, the notorious "Sunni Triangle" where danger could lurk around each bend in the road, inside of every approaching vehicle, or under any of the countless piles of trash or rocks that littered the roadside.

Suddenly, just as Graff was pulling up into line, a shrieking, unintelligible

See **AMBUSH** on 11.

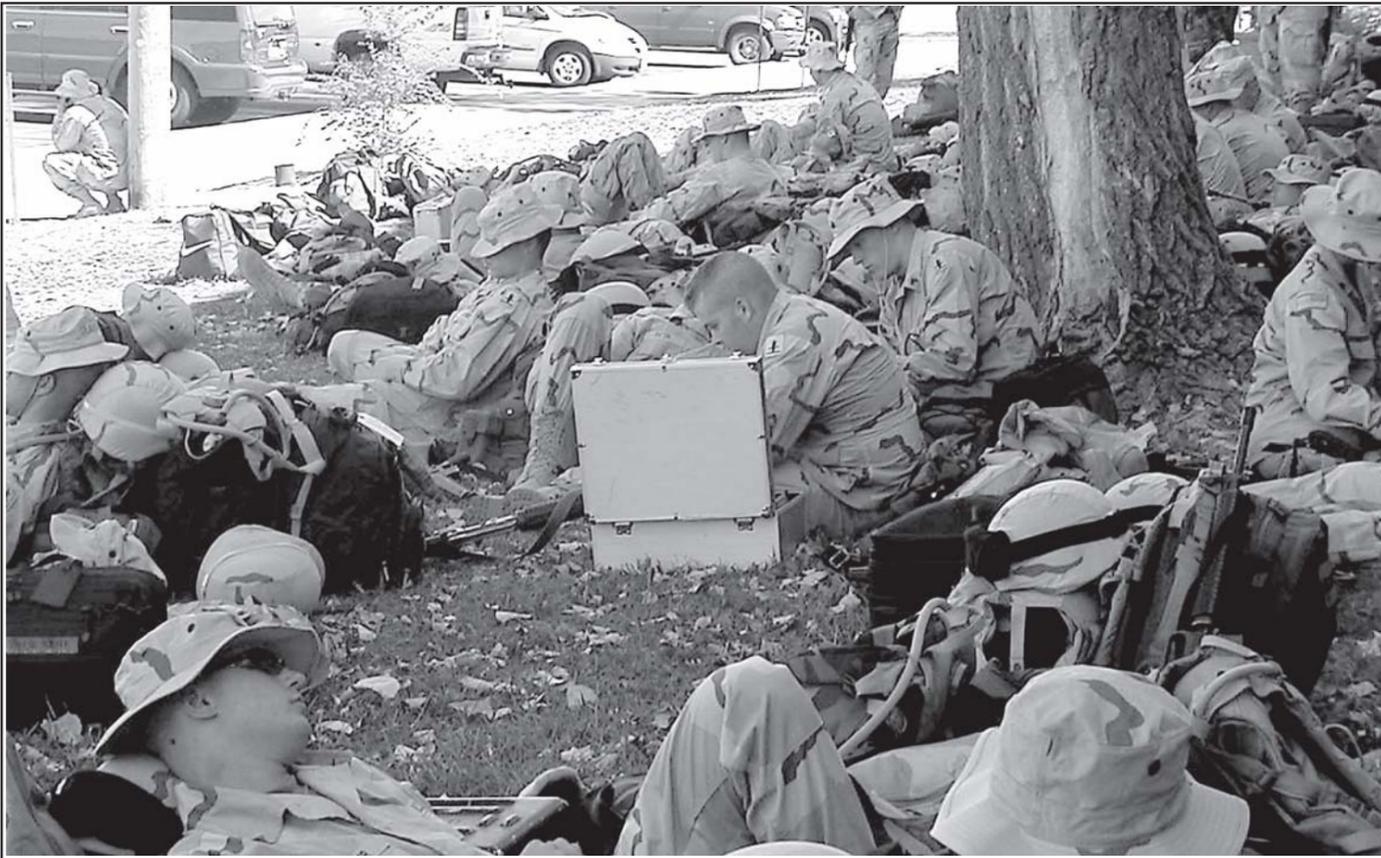


Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Steve Harris

On Their Way: Members of the 1075th Transportation Company from Columbus and York wait in the shade of a Fort Riley, Kan., building in September 2004 as they prepare to depart on a flight that would take them to Kuwait.

AMBUSH continued from page 10.

voice exploded through a radio speaker. Less than a split-second later, Graff jammed his foot down onto his breaks, attempting to slow his truck as the vehicles in front of him began to swerve and squeal to a stop, causing an immediate traffic jam of intermixed vehicles.

And then, the unthinkable happened. The sound of bullets, rocket propelled grenades and explosions suddenly filled the air. Gunfire ripped into the left side of the Convoy 678 – so called because it was the 678th convoy the 1075th Transportation Company's parent battalion had sent north into Iraq since arriving in theater six months earlier.

"I really didn't know what was going on at the front of the convoy," said Graff, whose biggest concern less than a year earlier had been simply preparing for a test at Northeast Community College in Norfolk where he was majoring in Elementary Education. "All of a sudden we started taking fire and the convoy stopped."

It was approximately 11:20 a.m. and for the Soldiers involved, it seemed as though the doors to Hell had opened.

Background

To understand the 45-minute life-and-death battle the members of the 1075th Transportation Company found themselves in March 20, 2005, one must first understand the changing battlefield of Iraq and the way that the members of this Nebraska Army National Guard unit prepared to meet those challenges.

As Operation Iraqi Freedom prepared to enter its third year, the ever-changing insurgent tactics in Iraq had seemed to once again focus on a potential weak link in the American and Coalition effort.

Now, just a few short months after losing greatly during the late 2003 battles of Samarra and Fallujah, the insurgents seemed determined to disrupt the Americans' vital transportation and resupply chain from Kuwait to Iraq through roadside and vehicle-borne bombings, sniper attacks and ambushes.

To counter this threat, U.S. Army efforts had also shifted. Army leaders began to prepare their Soldiers for the risks of traveling in Iraq by conducting better and more realistic training. Better armor and armament were installed on vehicles. Convoy training, in particular, became more intense.

According to members of the 1075th Transportation Company, their unit's training was as focused and realistic as unit leaders could make it during the months leading up to their call-up in mid-2004. That training culminated in

a two-week annual training camp held at the Lt. Gen. Francis Greenleaf Training Center at Hastings in July 2004.

"I think we were as ready as we could be," said Staff Sgt. Jeff Uhl, a former Army Guard infantryman from Columbus who worked as a police officer in civilian life. "We had some Soldiers who had returned to Iraq who came out and talked to us out at Hastings...and they gave us some really good information."

"But, we found out when we got over (to Kuwait) that things had changed," said Uhl, who would serve as a convoy commander in Iraq.

"For example, the guys who talked to us said you'll only drive during the day, you'll find a place to stop before it gets dark. Well, once we got over there, once you got up to a certain point you couldn't drive during the day. You could only drive at night...it was totally opposite."

The 1075th Trans. Co. was officially mobilized for Operation Iraqi Freedom on Aug. 12, 2004, and deployed to Fort Riley, Kan., for final mobilization training. During the six weeks the unit spent in Kansas, the Soldiers practiced a variety of critical skills including live fire training, individual and crew-served weapons qualification, land navigation, and convoy defense exercises.

While all that was extremely important, some of the most important training occurred at the platoon- and squad-level where the groups of Soldiers – Soldiers who would soon depend on each other during the many difficult, multi-day convoy missions into Iraq – learned, practiced and rehearsed their individual and collective skills.

One of those skills, said Uhl, was taking the initiative – learning to think on one's feet.

"A lot of what (we) did (in Iraq) was based on the training we had," said Uhl. "Every situation is going to be a little different and a lot of what they did was on their own initiative."

Civilian Drivers and Other Factors

It was also during the training at Fort Riley that members of the 1075th Trans. Co. learned more about a factor that would become critical in the March 20 ambush: civilian truck drivers from several different countries.

"Actually, we didn't know anything about (having civilian third country national) drivers in our convoys until we got to Fort Riley," said Uhl.

According to Uhl, most convoys that departed Kuwait typically included civilian contract drivers – called TCNs – from such countries as Kuwait, Turkey, Pakistan and others. The ratio typically called for three to four TCN driv-

ers for every U.S. Army-driven truck.

Nebraska Guardsmen say that dealing with the often unpredictable drivers was often one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of their missions into Iraq.

"A lot of the civilian truck drivers were very untrained," said Staff Sgt. Douglas L. Griess, a convoy commander with the 1075th Trans. Co.'s third platoon. "We were told at some point, a lot of them had bought their drivers licenses. There were a couple of convoys we went out on where the drivers had never driven a truck before. Basically, they were thrown in the truck and they had to figure out how to drive."

What made the civilian driver presence particularly important during the ambush, said Uhl, was the fact that they served to be the unexpected and unpredictable wild card in the unit's preparations.

"As a convoy commander, you're responsible (for everything)," said Uhl. "You have to plan for the weakest link, basically. We never practiced with civilian drivers."

And, Uhl added, the Soldiers simply didn't know how the civilian drivers would react in certain, unexpected situations. "(The civilian drivers) don't get any military training. It's very difficult to even talk with them because a lot of them don't speak English," said Uhl. "And so you didn't know what to expect."

"All we told them was, 'Stay close to the Army trucks... follow the Army trucks,'" he added.

Uhl's location during the convoy would also become an important aspect of the March 20 ambush.

Initially, while training at Fort Riley, Uhl practiced commanding his convoy from a position located approximately midway in the vehicle procession. It was a standard Army tactic designed to give a convoy commander the maximum flexibility to best handle his convoy under any situation.

That changed when the unit finally arrived in Kuwait on Sept. 27, 2004.

"When we got there we talked to the unit that we were replacing and they said, it works best to have the convoy commander up (in) front (of the procession)," said Uhl. "They gave us several reasons...sometimes you get someplace, to a gate or a checkpoint, and they want to talk to the convoy commander. Well, if he's in the middle (of the convoy) then he's got to make his way all the way to the front."

"(In training) we always put the assistant convoy commander up front to talk the convoy in," Uhl said. "But (the unit we replaced) said that this is what

works. They were the ones who had been there, doing it for a year...so we started (putting) the convoy commander in the front."

Convoy 678

After spending approximately 30 days learning from the Soldiers they were replacing, members of the 1075th Transportation Company officially took over their new mission in October 2004.

Based out of Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, the company was assigned to the 106th Transportation Battalion, an active duty Army organization assigned to the 101st Airborne Division.

The 1075th Trans. Co.'s mission was huge and dangerous. Responsible for transporting supplies and equipment to and from camps all across Kuwait and Iraq, the Nebraska Army National Guard company would record more than 4 million collective combat convoy miles in Iraq during its year-long deployment overseas.

The Soldiers driving those miles were subjected to dozens of attacks ranging from roadside and vehicle-borne bombs, to small arms fire, rocket propelled grenades and snipers.

By the time the unit prepared to conduct Convoy 678, the members of the 1075th Trans. Co. were combat veterans. They literally had seen and experienced everything that could possibly be thrown against them.

At least that's what they thought.

After loading in Kuwait, Convoy 678's mission called for a two-day convoy to Logistical Support Area Anaconda, located north of Baghdad, beginning on March 19, 2005. Along with 22 Department of Defense and TCN-driven semi trucks, the convoy consisted of eight two-person 1075th Trans. Co. crews driving six M-915A3 tractor trailer systems, two M-915 bobtails (a name given to a vehicle consisting of a tractor without a trailer) and three armored Hum-Vee "gun trucks" manned by members of the 518th Guntruck Company (Provisional), an ad-hoc unit made up of National Guard and active duty Army Soldiers from several different units.

Spread out in a long line amongst the civilian-driven trucks and Soldier-manned Hum-Vees, the members of the 1075th Trans. Co. represented a cross-section of Nebraska. A civilian police officer from Columbus. A civilian electrician from Blair. A nursing student from Clarks. An education student from Ainsworth. An unemployed factory worker from Columbus. A civilian prison guard from Omaha. A mechanic from Columbus. A future Science teacher from Fullerton.

According to Uhl, Convoy 678 was what the Army called an Iraqi Express mission, meaning that it was a high-priority convoy filled with replacement parts and supplies needed for day-to-day operations in Iraq, part of a logistical effort that departed Kuwait on an almost daily basis.

Because it was an Iraqi Express mission, the convoy was given top priority when loading and unloading. It would also be able to use high-priority routes and – if all things went according to plan – be back in Kuwait in approximately five days.

Uhl said that the convoy seemed marked for trouble from the moment it left Kuwait. On the first day, as the convoy passed through Safwan, a town on the border with Kuwait that had become notorious for the metal spikes that were often left in the road, the mission immediately encountered a hitch to its plans.

As the convoy rolled through the border town, Uhl said somebody called out a warning that they'd seen something in the road.

"I don't know if somebody threw it out there or what, (but) there was a piece of metal thrown out into the road," said Uhl, who rode in a trailer-less bobtail directly behind the lead 518th Guntruck Co. Hum-Vee. "Most of the trucks were able to straddle it...to go over the top of it."

Most, but not all. About mid-way through the convoy, a 1075th Trans. Co. **See AMBUSH on 12.**

The Soldiers of Convoy 678

Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl
Convoy Commander
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Tim Bos
Columbus, Neb.

Pfc. Ricky DeLancey
Columbus, Neb.



Sgt. Terrance
Ricketts
Omaha, Neb.

Sgt. Anthony
Bloebaum
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Jennifer Beck
Clarks, Neb.

Spc. John Harris
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Jacob Graff
Ainsworth, Neb.

Spc. Kelly Kinzer
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Paul Rullo
Schuyler, Neb.

Spc. Thomas
Heesacker
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Michael
Sharples
Wayne, Neb.

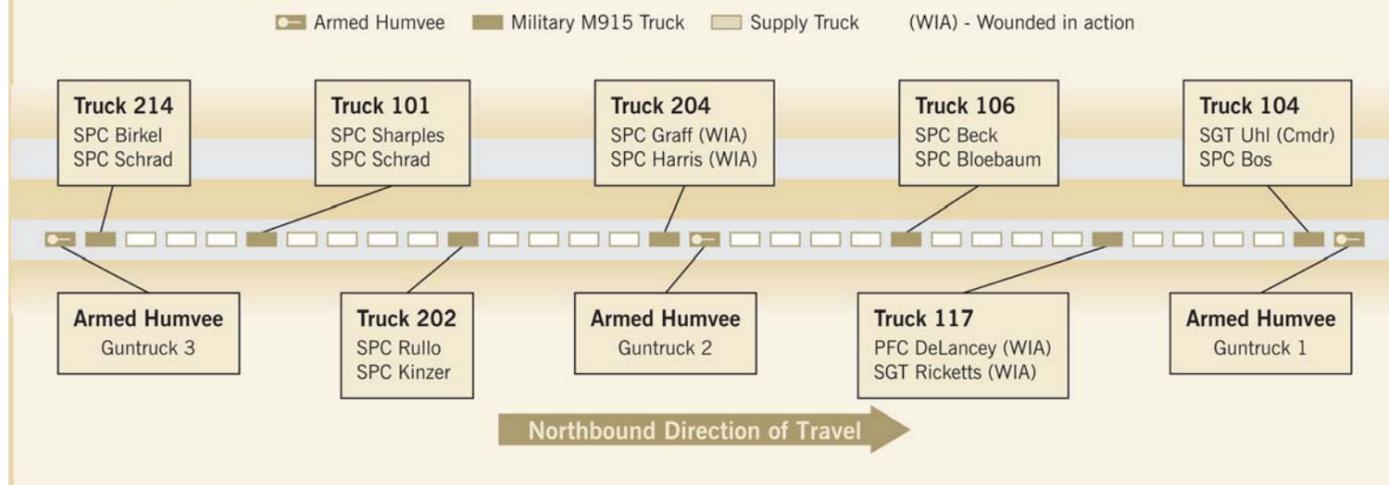
Spc. Joshua Birkel
Columbus, Neb.



Spc. Jay Schrad
Omaha, Neb.

Convoy 678

Thirty-three vehicles, military and civilian trucks hauling supplies to Camp Anaconda, escorted by three heavily armed Hum-Vees.



Graphic by Gerry Lawson

AMBUSH continued from page 11.

crew, driving a truck with a newer up-armored cab that made the vehicle sit lower to the ground, struck the metal spike.

"When he tried to straddle it, (the spike) caught his oil pan and ripped it open," said Uhl. "So we had to pull over."

After the convoy's maintenance crew checked the damaged truck, said Uhl, it was quickly determined that the vehicle was inoperable.

Uhl was now faced with a difficult decision. Because the maintenance bobtail had to tow the disabled truck to the next American base, Uhl had to take his bobtail and hook it to the disabled truck's trailer. While this served to save the trailer and its valuable supplies from being abandoned on the side of the road, it also destroyed Uhl's ability to maneuver easily through the convoy.

Misgivings

Even before event at Safwan, other members of the convoy were worried about going out on this particular mission. One of those was Spc. Jennifer Beck.

A 2003 High Plains Community High School graduate from Clarks, Neb., Beck had been enrolled at Fremont's Midland Lutheran College prior to the unit's mobilization. There, she had studied Fitness and Sports Management, with hopes of becoming a coach someday.

Recently, though, she had begun rethinking her career plans. Instead of coaching, she now wanted to become a nurse.

Beck's future had also changed dramatically during her time overseas as a Nebraska Army National Guard truck driver. Just three weeks prior to the start of Convoy 678, Beck had become engaged to Spc. Tim Bos, a fellow member of the 1075th Trans. Co., who was now serving as Uhl's driver in the lead truck.

Following the ambush Beck told a reporter from the *Omaha World Herald* that she and Bos had talked about her unexplained nervousness despite having traveled in Iraq "tons" of times.

"I don't want to leave," she reportedly told Bos. "I just don't want to leave. Can't we just stay here?"

In the end, though, there really wasn't any choice. They were Soldiers and they had a job to do.

And the mission came first. They weren't the only ones who had misgivings either. Spc. John Harris said he also felt nervousness when he heard the route the convoy had been ordered to take.

"It just sets the tone for the whole, whole trip," said Harris, who had joined the National Guard on Sept. 12, 2003, just two years following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. "You know that if you take one route north, you're probably going to take that same route back."

"And Bismark always means something... it always means trouble," added Harris.

Convoy 678 was to be Harris' first

convoy into Iraq since returning from Columbus on his two-week leave where he'd just celebrated his 21st birthday.

"When I heard the word, Bismark... I was thinking, 'First trip back and we're doing Bismark... nothing good on this convoy is going to happen.'"

Scania

After recovering from the road spike incident near Safwan, the convoy again headed north. Driving all day along Iraq's busy southern highways, the convoy finally reached their first way-station at a huge American and Coalition logistical hub named Scania near the city of Al Hillah.

There, Uhl's hopes of getting the damaged truck repaired were quickly disappointed.

"They didn't have any oil pans," said Uhl.

Again, Uhl was faced with a difficult decision that would soon have unforeseen consequences. Should he leave the truck and its cargo behind until it could be fixed? Or should he continue pulling the valuable trailer behind his bobtail, thus limiting his maneuverability?

"I made a decision that rather than tow the truck behind our maintenance bobtail, which would leave us with no bobtail - (we would leave the disabled) truck and crew at Scania," said Uhl. "And on the way back, we would pick them up and haul them back."

"So, that meant I had (to keep the) trailer on my bobtail," he added. "The whole point of having a bobtail was that you're more mobile. Having the trailer on pretty much took that away."

While at Scania, the Nebraska crews also received an updated briefing on the threats they could encounter during the next day's mission to LSA Anaconda, which was located north of Baghdad near the city of Balad. That briefing covered such things as how many roadside improvised explosive devices had been found along the Route Bismark, and predictions on other dangerous things the Soldiers might encounter as the convoy traveled north.

"They actually did a pretty good job with their briefings," said Uhl. "They took it very seriously and it showed in the briefings they gave us."

One thing that the Uhl said he found particularly unnerving was a report that an Iraqi demonstration had been scheduled for the next morning.

"They told us that there was some demonstration going on on Bismark," said Uhl. "And they said to be careful, but that (the protesters) didn't appear to be aggressive... just some sort of gathering."

Uhl was also told that insurgents had been particularly active near a bridge just south of Anaconda in recent days and that the Americans expected that activity to continue.

One thing the Soldiers weren't told that night, however, was that a convoy had been hit by a small ambush somewhere along Bismark just a day or two earlier.

That's information, Uhl said, he would've found particularly useful.

"We found out later that yeah, it had been a bad area historically," he said.

"We knew the route itself... that route was more dangerous," Uhl added. "But that particular area where we got hit, we didn't know that there had been an ambush there just a day or two earlier."

March 20, 2005

Sunday, March 20, 2005, dawned clear and crisp, not much unlike most days in Iraq that March. Forecasts called for temperatures to remain in the mid-70s throughout the day.

"It was an absolutely beautiful day," said Uhl, adding that he let his Soldiers sleep in that morning so that they could be fresh for the day's mission. "It was just perfect... cool, clear, no dust..."

About midmorning, the Soldiers of Convoy 678 finally gathered around Uhl to discuss the day's plan of action. According to Uhl, the morning briefing was an important part of successfully conducting convoy operations in Iraq.

"Typically we would mount up in the trucks about an hour before departure," he said. "Then, about 30 minutes prior, we would get our final intelligence briefing to ensure that we were getting information that was as new as possible."

With his Soldiers gathered around him, Uhl discussed the route they would be taking, the basic formation makeup and what each truck crew should do if they came into contact with the enemy.

The Soldiers then reloaded into their trucks and departed the base for the second leg of their trip.

Leading the way was an armored Hum-Vee from 518th Truck Company (Provisional) who drove by the callsign "Regulator 1".

Directly behind Regulator 1 was "Truck #104" crewed by convoy commander Uhl and his driver Bos.

The second Nebraska truck behind Truck 104 was Truck #117, which was crewed by Sgt. Terrance Ricketts, an Omaha prison guard in civilian life, and Pfc. Ricky DeLancey, a laid-off factory worker from Columbus. Separating them and Uhl and Bos' truck were four white, civilian-driven semi trucks.

After Truck 117 pulled through the gate, they were followed by an additional four white trucks and then Truck #106, crewed by Beck and Sgt. Anthony Bloebaum, a quiet electrician from Blair who was serving as the assistant convoy commander during this particular mission.

Behind Beck and Bloebaum came four more white trucks, followed by the convoy's second armored escort, Regulator 2. Following directly behind that Hum-Vee was Truck #204, crewed by Spc. Jacob Graff, a Northeast Nebraska Community College student who had grown up on a farm near Ainsworth, and Harris, who, prior to the deployment, had worked in a variety of odd jobs around Columbus.

Further back, separated again by four

See AMBUSH on 13.



Photo taken from a video courtesy of Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl

View of the Battlefield: A two-story house and the southbound lane of Route Bismark as seen by a civilian driver during the March 20, 2005, ambush at Salmon Pak, Iraq. According to most accounts the insurgents initiated their ambush from this two-story house, peppering Convoy 678's lead gun truck and Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl's semi-truck with small arms fire. The insurgents then continued their ambush from the surrounding trees, berms and other nearby buildings.

AMBUSH continued from page 12.

white trucks was Spc. Paul Rullo of Schuyler and Spc. Kelly Kinzer of Columbus driving Truck #202. They were followed, after three white trucks, by Spc. Michael Sharples, a Wayne State College student from Fullerton, and Spc. Thomas Heesacker from Platte Center, who shared the cab of Truck #101.

At the tail end of the column, came Spc. Joshua Birkel, a unit mechanic who was attending the University of Nebraska-Omaha with hopes of one day becoming a teacher. He shared the convoy's lone remaining maintenance bobtail truck with Spc. Jay Schrad, from Omaha.

Bringing up the convoy's tail was the unit's final armored escort, Regulator 3.

In all, the convoy – 33 vehicles in all – snaked backward along the rough Iraqi highway for several miles as they began their journey northward.

Demonstration

After the last of Convoy 678's vehicles steered through the gates of Scania, Uhl ordered the convoy to turn northeast on a meandering route that would take them toward a bridge crossing over the Tigris River and then back toward the northwest onto Route Bismark, an alternate supply route that was used occasionally as a way to keep the insurgents guessing as to which route the Americans would be using on a particular day.

Like the officials at Scania had predicted, an Iraqi demonstration was in full steam as the trucks passed by a small town near the Tigris River around mid-morning.

"We drove by and...there were a lot of people gathered and they were waving stuff like flags and things...black flags," said Uhl. "It looked like some sort of religious thing."

"But they weren't aggressive to us at all," he added. "They were just there."

Beck agreed. "It wasn't a riot... just a bunch of people," she said. "It was a protest... a positive protest. They were telling us good job because we were there helping them. There were flags all over the place."

Her truck mate, Bloebaum, wasn't so sure.

"It already seemed kind of fishy," said Bloebaum, who as assistant convoy commander was responsible for maintaining radio and communications contact with the other members of the convoy as well as nearby American forces and bases, and the unit's base back in Kuwait. "It was like some sort of gathering. That was weird to us because every time we started on that route, there was never that many people there."

Uhl said that once the demonstration

was successfully behind the convoy, he settled in. Nerves dropped back down to a relatively normal state as he began to focus on the dangers he expected to encounter closer to Anaconda, especially along a route the Soldiers had nicknamed "IED Alley" because of the amount of roadside bombs that had gone off there in recent months.

"Bismark was a concern, but not really the biggest concern," he said. "I was more worried about what we were going to encounter later on in the day."

Checkpoint

A short while later, as the convoy rumbled down a rough four-lane highway separated by a dirt median, they came upon an Iraqi-manned checkpoint near Salmon Pak. Many of the Nebraskans said that the Iraqi National Guardsmen manning the checkpoint seemed oddly out of place.

"Going through the checkpoint...I kind of had a weird feeling because it was an Iraqi checkpoint, so it was all Iraqi troops...there were no (American Soldiers) there. And one of (Iraqi Guardsmen) had this big, huge RPG," said Birkel. "Everybody (in the convoy) was looking off to the left and wondering why the heck that guy was holding it."

Beck, however, said she didn't really see anything amiss or strange at the checkpoint.

"The convoy had actually been pretty good," said Beck. "A lot of people noticed the RPG at the check point. I never noticed it."

Snaking her way through the checkpoint, Beck steered her truck back onto the main highway as Bloebaum – seated in the passenger's seat to her right – spoke to another 1075th Trans. Co. Soldier currently involved in a different convoy in northern Iraq via a secure communication network.

Everything, she said, seemed normal.

Uhl, too, said he felt some comfort as the convoy passed through the Iraqi checkpoint. He said he took particular comfort as he looked at the amount of traffic traveling the highway in front of him.

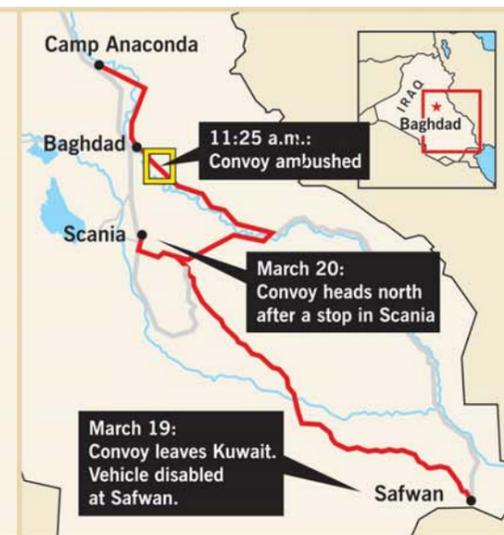
"There were a lot of people walking around in the area...and a considerable amount of traffic," said Uhl. "(Most people will) tell you that if there's nobody around...that's when something's going to happen."

As the trucks picked up speed, Uhl said he once again settled back into his seat, his mind focusing back onto getting through "IED Alley" and the potential dangers that lay closer to LSA Anaconda.

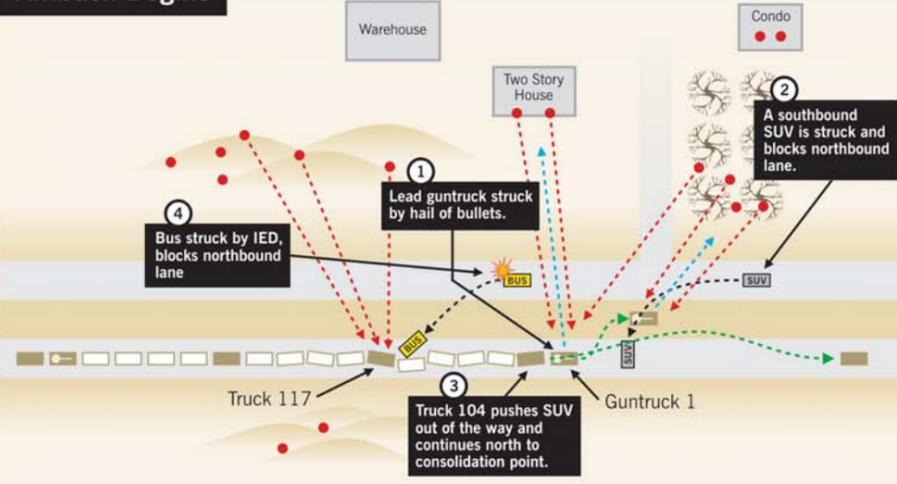
It was approximately 11:20 a.m. The day – and life as the Nebraska Soldiers

Battle of Bismark

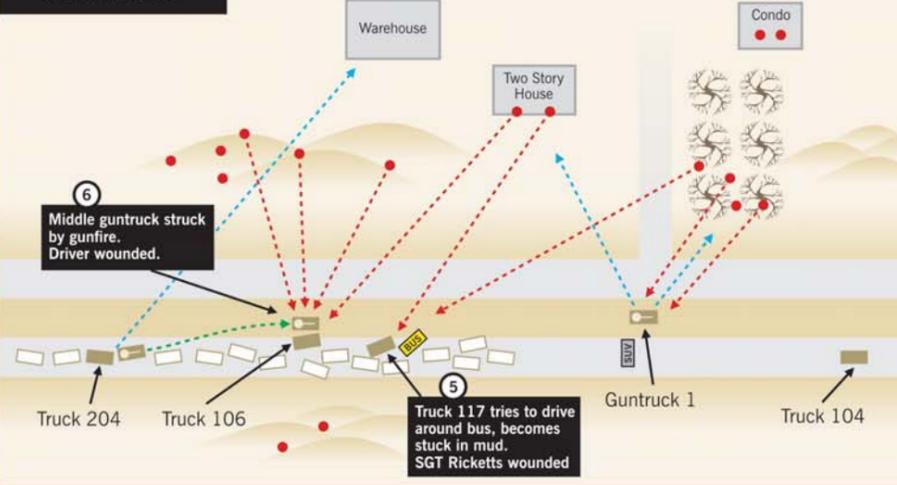
Convoy 678 left Kuwait on March 19, 2005, with hopes of traveling to and from Camp Anaconda in approximately five days. The convoy consisted of 33 vehicles under the command of the 1075th Transportation Company.



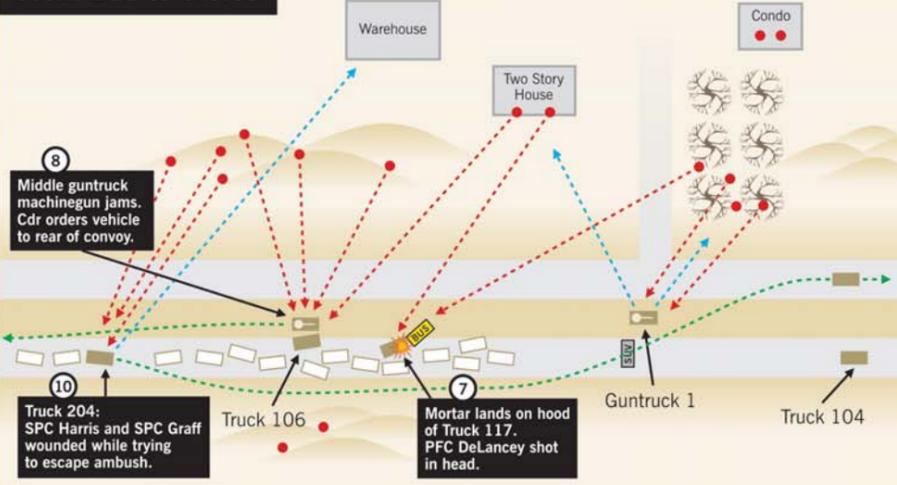
Ambush Begins



Traffic Jam



From Bad to Worse



Graphic by Gerry Lawson

had known it – was about to be changed forever.

'Contact Left'

Graff and Harris, located at the center of the convoy in Truck #204, had just finished snaking through the Iraqi checkpoint and were pushing their truck to the limit to catch up with the trucks in front of them. Listening to the music that filled their cab from a portable CD player the two Soldiers always carried with them into Iraq, Harris said he remembered looking out of his passenger window to the left as the truck's engine roared to pick up speed.

Suddenly the trucks in front of them began to swerve and decelerate madly.

"We had just gotten up to speed and we were slowing down again," said Harris. "I was kind of like, 'What the heck is

going on?...Why are we slowing down?'"

"We were looking around and then we heard, 'Contact Left.'"

The voice, said Uhl, came from the driver of the lead gun-truck.

"We were driving along when all of sudden the gun truck started swerving... and the driver.. a female who was normally a very no-nonsense, very professional (Soldier)... she's screaming on the radio and I couldn't understand her," said Uhl. "I asked Bos... 'What did she say?' and he said, 'I don't know.' I couldn't understand her, but she was really excited...that was not like her."

"(That's when) we started hearing the gunfire."

According to unit post action reports, the insurgents – who were estimated to number between 40-50 – had chosen to

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open up their pre-arranged ambush at just the instant that the 1075th Convoy was passing a second, south-bound convoy near a field dotted by a small orchard and bordered by several warehouses, a two-story house and a larger power plant.

According to Uhl and those reports, the insurgents initiated their ambush by peppering the lead gun truck with a heavy burst of small arms fire. A video – shot by the gunner of that gun truck just as the ambush commenced – seems to confirm that chain of events.

Uhl said the initial noise sounded like “a lot of firecrackers.”

“You could hear the bullets going past. You could hear that little snap,” he said. “Some of them kind of had a whistling sound and some of them snapped. I mean, it was a high volume...there were a lot of bullets flying around.”

“(That’s when) we realized what she was screaming about,” he added.

Uhl said his mind immediately shifted into gear. Back at Hastings and at Fort Riley, the Soldiers had frequently practiced what to do should their convoy get caught in an ambush. The unit and Army standard operating procedures for truck drivers was really quite simple: Get the heck out of dodge.

“We’re not set up to attack,” said Uhl. “Our (procedures) are basically to keep moving. So that’s what we were going to do.”

That goal was easier said than done, though. As soon as the lead gun truck was struck, the Hum-Vee driver quickly maneuvered her armored vehicle toward the center median so that the rest of Convoy 678 could pass by as the escort provided covering fire.

However, because of the high volume of unexpected fire, the driver of the Hum-Vee quickly screeched to a stop before moving off to the left of the main lane. That, said Uhl, was enough to force him to slow down and come to a stop, setting off a critical chain of events.

“They were stopped for only a few seconds,” said Uhl. “But it was long enough that we had to stop.”

As Bos jammed the trucks’ brakes, the civilian and military trucks also had to apply their brakes, coming to a stop in a jumble of white and green trucks, creating a huge, bottleneck traffic jam.

As the lead gun truck moved off into the median, Uhl said he ordered Bos to maneuver around the Hum-Vee to the right in order to keep his truck out of the direct line of fire. Suddenly, the sounds of exploding rocket propelled grenades or mortars began contributing to the already noisy environment.

“When the gun truck in front of us pulled off to the side, three (rocket-propelled grenades) hit right (next to us),” said Uhl, adding that whoever was shooting at them, had his truck completely bracketed. “It was like one, two, three...they were hitting the road right next to (us)...at the time I thought it was mortars...boom, boom, boom...and we went around them.”

Just as the last of the explosions hit, a south-bound civilian sport utility vehicle swerved into the northbound lane and directly into Truck 104’s path.

“This SUV comes over and just t-bones (a) car right in front of us,” said Uhl. “And Bos swerved to the left and hit it and knocked it out of the way. And then we went down the center of the median, which was muddy.”

Piecing Together The Battle

The presence of the initial SUV, said 1st Lt. Charles Gilkey, a member of the 1075th Trans. Co. who was later charged with writing the official unit narrative of the battle, is one of a multitude questions that have befuddled investigators since March 20.

Was the SUV driver a civilian who had simply been surprised by the ambush and reflexively drove into the opposite lane? Or was he part of the ambush, responsible for creating an obstacle that would force the trucks to stop and fix them in place?



Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl

Scars of War: A white, civilian-driven semi truck sits on Route Bismark on March 20, its tires shot out and its trailer marked with the tell-tale sign of a rocket-propelled grenade. When the ambush struck Convoy 678 on March 20, 2005, unarmored trucks like this were struck by a massive volume of insurgent fire, causing the civilian drivers to take refuge in the right-hand ditch, contributing to a road-blocking traffic jam.

A second question, said Gilkey, was the presence of water in the median. Although several videos shot before, during and after the ambush show the presence of water in the ditches and median between the two lanes, the sheer amount of water at that location in the median caused investigators to wonder if the water had been placed there as a tactical fixing obstacle.

“My guess would be that (the water was) planted,” said Gilkey some months later. “It’s a fixing obstacle.”

Uhl said it’s impossible to fully reconcile all that happened during the initial moments of the ambush.

“In that area, there was water on the left hand side of the road...standing water. So it’s hard to say,” he said. “The same thing with the SUV. Was it somebody that was coming south and with all of this shooting (he) freaked out? Maybe the guy was shot?”

“Or was it somebody who was trying to block us...stop us?” he added. “You never know...it could’ve been either.”

Commander Without A Convoy

After slamming through the disabled SUV, Uhl and Bos continued pushing forward, eager to lead the rest of the convoy out of the deadly kill zone. Turning back into the northbound lane, Uhl said he yelled into his radio: “Action left. Keep moving.”

“There was mud all over the windshield and everything,” said Uhl. “We were kind of dealing with that and I was looking to see if I could see where the shooting is coming from and I saw a few muzzle flashes on the left.”

Even though he could see where some of the firing was coming from, Uhl said it was impossible to swing his weapon into action because he was sitting in the right-hand seat, meaning that in order to shoot at the attacking insurgents, Uhl would have to aim his weapon in front of Bos’ face and shoot through the driver’s side window. He also couldn’t lean out of his window and shoot across the windshield because of the sheer amount of bullets now flying by.

“At the time, we were trying to stay behind the armor,” he said. “There were so many rounds going by that I just remember thinking: ‘One of these is going to hit me and it’s going to hurt.’”

“But, I didn’t get hit.”

Within a few seconds, Uhl and Bos had made it out of the kill zone, the amount of bullets striking their truck quickly lessening. They then continued down the road approximately an additional mile where, according to company procedures, the rest of the convoy would rally, check for wounds and damage, and then continue on its way.

Uhl said that as he looked in his mirror, instead seeing the rest of the

“There are so many rounds going by that I just remember thinking: ‘One of these is going to hit me and it’s going to hurt.’”

— Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Uhl
Convoy Commander

convoy moving up behind him, the glass was empty...filled only by billowing smoke from a damaged vehicle back in the area they had just left.

“I looked in the rear view mirror and I don’t see anybody. And Bos, he says that he doesn’t see anybody either,” said Uhl.

Uhl was suddenly a convoy commander without a convoy. And, as his radio continued to be filled with the voices of his Soldiers, he knew the rest of Convoy 678 was in deadly danger.

“We were out of the kill zone. And at that point, I figured that everyone else would just follow,” said Uhl. “But that didn’t happen.”

‘I’m hit’

Located four trucks behind Uhl and Bos in Truck 117, Pfc. Ricky DeLancey and Sgt. Terry Ricketts had just weaved through the Iraqi checkpoint and pulled into their convoy position when the sounds of gunfire filled the air.

Suddenly, the white trucks in front of DeLancey and Ricketts began to slow and swerve violently, coming to a stop at odd angles, intermingled two and three abreast.

Pulling over quickly, DeLancey and Ricketts immediately realized that they were taking fire from the left, the shots ricocheting off of their armored cab and slicing into their trailer.

Adrenaline quickly pumped into the two Nebraskans’ veins as they realized that the road in front of them was effectively blocked by the civilian-driven white trucks.

DeLancey and Ricketts made an odd pair, most of their fellow truck drivers said. Ricketts, a 1994 Creighton Prep graduate, was known as an intelligent and opinionated person who loved to talk about a wide range of issues. A fitness buff, he worked as prison guard and also played guitar in a rock band back in Omaha.

Contrary to Ricketts, DeLancey was a 2002 graduate of Shelby High School who was known as quiet person with an easy-going sense of humor. Prior to deploying to the Middle East, DeLancey had worked in a factory in Columbus, only to be laid off shortly before the call-up.

Although seemingly opposite personalities, the two Nebraskans had created

a bond of sorts during their mission into Iraq, a bond that would soon be tested beyond belief.

Sitting behind the driver’s wheel, Ricketts struggled to figure out what to do next as the trucks in front of him stood motionless, unwilling or unable to move any further as bullets smashed into unarmored cabs and trailers. Inching forward, Ricketts and DeLancey looked for a gap to the left of the trucks, hoping to find a way to escape the kill zone.

Suddenly, in the left hand lane a south-bound AAFES bus was struck by improvised explosive device, sending the trucks slamming into the southbound lane directly in front of Ricketts’ and DeLancey’s truck.

“It flipped up and landed sideways right about here,” Ricketts later described, using his hand to show how the bus caromed over the north-bound lane and into the right-side ditch, effectively shutting any potential escape route.

“There was no place to go,” said Ricketts. “So, I had to try and go out (through the center median) and around.”

Ricketts had barely pulled into the median when he realized that it too was impassable. As his truck’s tires sank into the deep water and mud, the insurgents shifted the mass of their fire onto Truck 117, shredding the trucks left-facing tires, putting it out of action.

“The truck just got lodged right there,” said Ricketts. “And that’s where we sat for like 20 minutes taking fire.”

As the truck slipped into the mud, Ricketts said he was hit almost immediately by a bullet that pierced the armor just slightly forward of his driver’s door and then traveled into his leg, striking him just above his left knee and through and partially out his thigh.

“It was just kind of sticking out here,” said Ricketts later, gesturing toward his thigh. He said the force of the blow stunned him, filling his body with searing pain.

“I didn’t know how bad I’d been hit, but it was worse than anything I’d ever experienced in my life,” he said. “You have that big bundle of nerves in the back of your leg and it just crippled me. I couldn’t move either leg.”

DeLancey, sitting in the passenger’s seat, quickly realized that he and his driver were sitting ducks. He said he grabbed the truck’s radio microphone to tell the rest of the unit that Ricketts had been hit and then handed the mike to Ricketts so that he could start returning fire with his M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon.

The sound of Ricketts’ voice at that instant, say the other members of the convoy, is something none of them will ever forget.

Suddenly, the battle had become a lot more serious.

Sounds Of A Wounded Comrade

Located in the first green truck behind the now disabled Truck 117, Spc. Jennifer Beck said that from the moment the ambush started all hell seemed to break loose. Trucks in front of her swerved to avoid the incoming fire and each other as they rapidly decelerated to a halt.

Trying to keep from hitting the trucks in front of her, Beck quickly maneuvered her vehicle to a stop, coming to rest pointing slightly off the pavement to the left. Seconds later, the middle 518th Guntruck Co. Hum-Vee crew moved up along side her to return fire at the insurgents, covering Beck’s vehicle from the mass of incoming fire, but giving her and her co-driver, Sgt. Anthony Bloebaum, a perfect view of the situation to their front.

“I had a clear view of Ricketts’ and DeLancey’s truck... everything that went on on the west side of the convoy,” said Beck.

“When we stopped, Bloebaum (and I) kind of looked at each other. We’re like, what the hell? What the hell do we do?”

See **AMBUSH** on 15.

AMBUSH continued from page 13.

said Beck.

Beck said that Bloebaum immediately grabbed the secure radio microphone and began calling for help, letting nearby American units and bases know that an American convoy was under fire and pinned down.

Beck said she then heard Ricketts' voice come through a second radio tuned to the convoy's frequency. "(It was) the worst screaming I have ever heard in my life," said Beck. "He said he was shot and how bad it hurt."

Further back in the convoy, others heard Ricketts as well.

"It was the scariest thing in the world," said Spc. Michael Sharples, a 2002 graduate of Fullerton High School who, before the deployment, had been a sophomore at Wayne State College where he was studying Natural Science Education. "He's a big guy. He's lifting weights and everything. And his voice on the radio, it sound just like a child... a child screaming for his mother."

"He's just screaming, 'I'm shot. I'm shot. It hurts,'" said Sharples, who was driving Truck 101, the second-to-last green truck in the convoy. "And he wouldn't get off the radio... that was probably the worst feeling. That was probably the scariest I was the whole time."

"I knew this wasn't going to come out as good as it should've," he added.

Midway between Sharples and Beck, Harris said he quickly became frustrated by the confusion that had suddenly gripped the convoy.

Riding shotgun in Truck 204, the first green truck behind Beck and Bloebaum, Harris said that as soon as the lead gun truck radioed 'Contact Left,' it was followed by a second call saying, 'Contact Right.'

Because they were located approximately midway in the convoy, Harris said that his truck was probably the first in the convoy that was able to avoid becoming entangled in the traffic jam to his front. Still, even though they had the ability to move, they were effectively stopped, unable to know which way to go.

"We're looking around, scanning like crazy, heart-rate racing like crazy," said Harris, adding that he kept looking into his right-hand mirror to make sure that no one was sneaking up along side the trucks while everyone's attention focused off to the left.

"And then, someone calmer said 'Contact Left and Right. They're in the warehouse,'" said Harris.

A few seconds later, a different and highly emotional voice came over the radio speaker. This time it was Ricketts, telling the rest of the convoy he was hurt.

Harris said that his concern for Ricketts quickly turned to agitation as the wounded Soldier continued to talk over the "hot" mike, telling the others how bad the pain felt, making the radio essentially unusable for everyone else.

"Your communications are critical," said Harris. "I (felt) bad because I understand that he was hurt...but, it was like...we can't do our jobs."

"It seemed like once the shots started ringing out, everyone just seemed to lose their sense of being an 88-Mike," Harris said, referring to the Army's military occupational specialty



Lucky To Be Alive: About a month after the March 20 battle, Pfc. Ricky Delancey, 1075th Transportation Company, sits in the cab of his truck, directly behind where a mortar struck the rear section of his truck's hood, sending fragments into his face and causing the truck to catch fire.

code for truck drivers. "To me, at that time it just seemed like people weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing, which is get out of the kill zone because we're not meant to sit here and fight the fight."

"From the way that people were talking on the radio, it just seemed like no one had a plan of getting out. It was, 'Where are these people? Let's shoot them,'" he added. "And I'm like, this is not job... we need to go with our plan, our SOP."

As Harris and Graff struggled over what to do next, Harris said he noticed a person crouching in the grass off to the left, perhaps a hundred yards away near what appeared to be a warehouse.

"I saw one guy over there, popping up and down," he said.

Unable to shoot from his position in the passenger's seat, Harris said he tried to point out the insurgent to Graff. After several long minutes of trying, Harris noticed the residue of gun smoke wafting over the patch of grass.

"I looked at Graff and pointed," said Harris. "I don't know how he knew, but he knew exactly where I was talking about. He took like seven or eight shots right at the grass in that area."

"He hit the area...if there was somebody in the grass there, they were dead," Harris said.

From Bad To Worse

At about the same time that Harris shot at his targeted insurgent, things were rapidly going from bad to worse throughout the convoy. Graff said he noticed many of the civilian truck drivers exiting their unarmored vehicles and heading for the apparent safety of the right-hand ditches. Others, he said, seemed to be hiding behind wheels and anything else that seemed to offer protection from the onslaught.

Suddenly, shots began to strike his truck, one round entering through the windshield and passing close by Graff's ear.

Graff said his mind struggled to take everything in.

"This is real," Graff said he remembered thinking. "Oh my God, is this really happening? It was total make believe."

Next to Truck 204, the 518th Guntruck Co. Hum-Vee crew was having obvious difficulties. Try-

ing to provide cover with the vehicle's mounted .50 caliber machinegun, Graff said he could see the gunner having trouble firing more than a round or two before the gun would jam.

"I remember hearing at least two rounds and then it jammed," said Graff. "He would rack it again, and then it jammed."

Suddenly, the gunner disappeared into the vehicle.

"I remember looking in front of me and nobody was in the turret at all," said Graff. "I was like, 'Holy Cow.'"

According to Gilkey, about 20 minutes into the fight, the driver of the middle gun truck was wounded when a heavy volley of machinegun fire struck the Hum-Vee. A second round also struck a fire extinguisher mounted on the bottom of the floor, filling the passenger compartment with white "smoke" as the extinguisher vented through the bullet hole.

Believing his vehicle on fire, his driver badly wounded, the commander of the Hum-Vee ordered his driver to back up. The driver began driving out of the kill zone, but soon fell unconscious from his wound.

The commander then stuck his foot between his drivers legs, and, while pushing down on the accelerator steered, the Hum-Vee to the back of the convoy.

The trail Hum-Vee was then ordered to the front to take the disabled crews' place.

Graff said that as that Hum-Vee moved backward, he looked over at Harris, wondering if they should try to make a break for the front of the convoy with the hopes that others would follow behind. He was unsure which way to go, however, because things in front of their truck seemed to be getting worse by the moment.

Up ahead in Ricketts' and DeLancey's truck, things definitely were getting worse by the second. According to DeLancey, after Ricketts was shot in the leg, he struggled to swing his machinegun into action, hoping keep the insurgents - who seemed to be moving toward his truck from several nearby sand berms - pinned down.

Suddenly, DeLancey said he heard a low, thudding sound, quickly followed by two others.

Mortars, DeLancey said he thought. He wasn't the only one, as someone else who radioed, "Incoming mortars."

The first mortar struck in front of DeLancey's truck, followed by the second, which landed neatly between the first impact and the front of their disabled vehicle.

"They're walking them in," DeLancey said the thought.

The third struck the truck on the right, rear side of the hood next to DeLancey's windshield. The force crushed the windshield, threw glass into DeLancey's face and caused a portion of the control panel to detach and land on Ricketts' leg, pinning him to the floor.

"I couldn't feel anything in my leg," said Ricketts. "I couldn't get it off of me...I'm not even sure what it was. It was just a big piece of metal."

"At that point, my whole brain had to reset itself after that mortar hit," he said. "It took me a second to even realize that I was still alive."

Ricketts said after regaining his senses, he realized that his co-driver was also now wounded. "Ricky was screaming that he couldn't see," Ricketts said. "He had taken a lot of shrapnel in his face and had burns on his arm."

"At that point, the truck was smoking...there was a little fire," Ricketts said.

A split-second later, a shot entered the truck through the window, striking DeLancey in the helmet and skimmed along his scalp just above his left ear, before exiting out the rear of his helmet.

"He turned to me...he said, 'I got shot,'" Ricketts said. "He was yelling that he had just got shot in his head and then his whole face was just covered in blood."

Back behind Ricketts and DeLancey, Harris and Graff had begun to inch their truck forward, looking for a gap. Shots suddenly began to strike the truck with greater force and volume. According to Harris, the two first attempted to move along to the right of the convoy, which offered the greatest protection from the shooting. As they inched toward the bottleneck, however, they quickly realized that that escape route was shut.

Then, just as they were about to turn to the left, a sudden burst of machinegun fire struck the truck.

"I looked over at Harris and a round came through the windshield, right center mass... I'm almost certain that's the one that hit him," said Graff, who was peppered in the face with broken glass, one piece embedding itself in his lip.

"I looked over at Harris and he was holding his neck," Graff said.

According to Harris, the round that punctured the window struck the front lip of his helmet, shattering it and sending bullet and helmet fragments downward into his face, nose and neck.

"It threw me against the door... but it didn't knock me out," said Harris, saying the force of the shot seemed to put him in a dreamlike trance. "It took forever after I got hit for me to sit back up."

As he lay against the seat, struggling to clear his mind, Harris said he felt something cold and wet splash against his

hand.

"I just knew it was blood," he said. "For some reason, that brought me out of this little daze and made me jump back into my seat. I just put pressure on it...my carotid artery...I didn't know where I was bleeding from, so I pinched off my carotid artery to make sure that I wasn't going to bleed out."

After regaining part of his senses, Harris realized that Graff was looking at him, trying to see if he was alright. Unfortunately, because of the wound Harris was now unable to speak, able to only make unintelligible sounds from his throat. Motioning to Graff, Harris pointed to the front of the convoy, trying to tell him that they needed to move, that he was hurt bad. He needed medical help, quick.

Graff pushed the accelerator, forcing the truck forward around the stopped vehicles in front of him. Reaching DeLancey and Ricketts' disabled truck, Graff pushed the burning AAFES bus out of his way and then turned out into the southbound lane and into the hail of gunfire.

Harris said the sound of bullets striking the truck sounded strangely like popcorn in a microwave. "It was just tatatatata of the bullets hitting the door or other parts of the truck," said Harris. "That's all I really remember."

Now past the critical point of the roadblock, Graff said he suddenly realized how hot the insurgent gunfire actually was.

"As soon as I got clear of the convoy into that southbound lane, all I could see was fiberglass as rounds hit the hood," he said. "Chunks of fiberglass were flying everywhere."

As he drove down the lane, Graff said he was struck by a bullet in his left shoulder as a round passed through his side window.

"I didn't even feel it," he said. I felt a tug and I put my hand up underneath my deltoid armor and pulled it down. It was all bloody."

"Then I heard an air leak. I thought that they'd hit one of my airlines, so I was worried about my trailer locking up," he said, before adding, "But they just shot out my tires."

Finally out of the kill zone, Graff said he pushed the truck as hard as he could toward where Uhl had set up the casualty collection point. He and Harris were now out of the kill zone, only the second Nebraska truck to do so.

'We're Going To Die'

Further back, Ricketts and DeLancey were struggling with what to do next. Their vehicle disabled and on fire, Ricketts lay on the floor, paralyzed beneath a heavy piece of metal. DeLancey, his face bleeding from bullet and shrapnel wounds, struggled to clear his eyes to see what was going on.

In the distance, Ricketts said, he could hear the insurgent fire, which now seemed to be coming much closer. Fear, he said, was beginning to take hold.

"We were both wounded," Ricketts said. "At that point he just looked at me and said, 'We're going to die.'"

"And all I could say was, 'I know.'"

Coming in the April Prairie Soldier, Part II "Courage Under Fire"

'Just Call Him Mayor'

Guard chief serving as camp mayor camp in Afghanistan

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

Back in Nebraska, he's simply known as "Chief."

However, since arriving in Afghanistan in January for a four-month tour of duty, Chief Master Sgt. Leo Kreifels of the 155th Communications Flight has been going by a different title: Mayor.

Kreifels took over the role of mayor of Camp Cunningham, located at the Bagram Airfield, in mid-January and has since been responsible for a variety of things including ensuring that Air Force members assigned to the camp are following established rules, that living quarters – nicknamed "B-Huts" – are kept up to standards, and that general use areas, such as the camp's morale hut, recreation tent and weight room are kept clean and in good repair.

"We owe it to the memory of Senior Airman Jason Cunningham to police ourselves and make Camp Cunningham the best camp on BAF," Kreifels was recently quoted in the base newspaper.

Kreifels isn't the only Nebraska Air National Guardsman currently serving in Afghanistan, either. Also assigned to Bagram Air Field is Col. George Skuodas who is currently serv-



Photo courtesy of Maj. Eric Elliot

Camp Mayor: Chief Master Sgt. Leo Kreifels, 155th Communications Flight, Nebraska Air National Guard, stands next to the Camp Cunningham, Afghanistan, sign where he is currently serving as camp mayor during a four-month deployment.

ing as the commander of the 455th Expeditionary Mission Support Group.

"I am responsible for a wide variety of missions including personnel, services, engineering, security and combat logistics," said Skuodas in a recent hometown news release.

"The logistics portion can be quite intensive as this includes all refueling of ground vehicles, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, vehicle transportation and maintenance, all passenger and cargo processing for flights inbound and out bound from Bagram Air Field and

downloading and uploading cargo to commercial carriers such as FEDEX and DHL."

Over the last four months, the 455th EMSG has supported more than 2,600 airlift missions moving almost 40,000 tons and 50,000 passengers, both military and civilian, into and out of the war zone.

The group is part of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, which is comprised of about 1,000 Airmen deployed from Air Force bases all over the world. The wing's primary mission is to support the Global War on Terrorism by providing aerial support for U.S. and Coalition forces throughout Afghanistan.

Since September, the wing's A-10 Thunderbolt II attack aircraft have flown more than 6,000 combat hours employing 21,000 rounds of 30mm cannon, and supporting American and coalition ground forces in more than 130 engagements.

Its C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft have flown more than 340 air-land missions and almost 80 airdrop missions providing food and supplies to military forces and civilian populations. Its explosive ordnance specialists have destroyed more than 7,200 mines, rockets and other weapons and munitions.

AFGHANISTAN continued from page 1.

first visit our own Soldiers from Nebraska, and second we wanted to get a better understanding of their mission in Afghanistan."

Lempke and Shunk, the state command sergeant major, arrived in Afghanistan on Jan. 10 and were immediately surprised to see how destroyed the country actually was.

"I had an idea of what to expect, but there is not much there. It is real desolate and such a huge huge country," said Shunk.

"There is a major lack of infrastructure. The roads are barely discernable and the homes are compounds made of mud and straw," said Lempke. "From the air the mountains look beautiful, but when you get right down to the surface you understand that Afghanistan is truly a survival country."

Once Lempke and Shunk had made their initial assessment, they turned to the business at hand: greeting troops and finding out more about their mission.

The current Nebraska Army National Guard mission is broken between the 209th Regional Training Institute and other various volunteer Soldiers.

One part of the mission consisted of groups called Embedded Training Teams (ETT), made up of 25 Nebraska National Guard Soldiers from various units across the state. Their mission is to live and work with the Afghan Army, provide assistance in training and developing military tactics, as well as helping the Afghan Army hunt down insurgents. The ETTs are spread out throughout different provinces, much like counties and even states in the U.S., said Lempke.

The 209th is made up of 37 Soldiers all concentrated in

Kabul, Afghanistan. They run a non-commissioned officer training academy at a place called Camp Alamo, which is similar to the Guard school at Camp Ashland, said Lempke.

"Afghan soldiers volunteer to come to Camp Alamo and the 209th teaches them the ways of being a good NCO," said Lempke. "Camp Alamo is the 'basic training' for Afghan soldiers who are privates on up to officers."

Prior to the American Soldiers' intervention in Afghanistan, Camp Alamo was the Taliban Headquarters, said Shunk. He added that members of the Nebraska National Guard are slowly trying to transition the war-torn country into a safe and decent place to live.

"The gradual emergence of the country into a viable economic entity is a very slow process. It is a frustrating mission in the sense that you wish the Afghan soldiers and the Afghan government could move quicker and make more progress, said Lempke. "We as Americans want to see progress and they just don't have the same attitude. You can sense the frustration in the slowness."

Lempke added that even though the mission is slow and frustrating, the Soldiers feel like they are making a difference. So much so that a number of the Nebraska Soldiers serving in Afghanistan have requested to extend their deployment, said Shunk.

"That tells you that they enjoy doing what they are doing and that they are well respected over there," said Shunk.

Shunk added that in speaking to the leaders of the Afghan Army, they said that the Nebraska Soldiers are representing the United States Army well "and they want to work with hundreds more just like us."

According to Shunk one of the biggest difficulties the Nebraska trainers have discovered is that



Photos courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk

Say Cheese: Members of the Afghan National Army take a break from their meal to smile for Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk.

the lack of even basic governmental infrastructure has far-reaching impact.

"There isn't even a simple banking system to make deposits, so we have to pay the Afghan soldiers in cash. In order for them to get their money to their families they have to physically take it to them. There are no banks to deposit and withdraw the money," said Shunk, "The simple things that we take for granted, they don't have over there."

Shunk added that part of the frustration American troops feel is a direct result of this infrastructure problem. Some of the Afghan soldiers must leave in order to give their family money. These soldiers are gone for days on end and some never return.

"That is part of the frustration. We train them up so long and issue them so much stuff and some leave and never come back. We don't understand the



Tour Of A Country Rebuilding Itself: A Soldier peers out of the hatch of an armored Humvee as he escorts Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke and Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk during a convoy through Kabul, Afghanistan.

tribal link between families. It is hard for us to grasp," said Shunk.

After seeing firsthand the problems that are still present in Afghanistan, Shunk and Lempke both said they understand more fully the importance of the job Nebraska troops are doing.

Lempke added that overall the trip was a successful one.

"We got to visit our Soldiers and get a good feel for the country. After visiting Kabul, I now have a better sense of the mission that our units are doing and can see that the task at hand is a hard one, but one they can be proud of," said Lempke.

Guard officers take three awards at Offutt training squadron

Commander says awards show seamless nature of new Guard-Offutt relationship

By Capt. Kevin Hynes

Editor

In a lot of cases, the awarding of three "officer of the quarter" awards to Guard officers serving in an active duty unit – be it Air Force or Army – would be big news.

In the case of an Offutt Air Force Base flight training squadron, however, the awards barely caused eyebrows to lift.

"The biggest part of the story is that there's not much of a story to it," said Lt. Col. John Rauch, commander of the 338th Combat Training Squadron at Offutt after three Nebraska Air National Guard officers earned awards in the last fiscal quarter of 2005. "They're just members of a squadron earning awards...there really isn't an active duty or Guard award."

The three Guardsmen are members of the 170th Operational Support Squadron, a new Guard unit assigned to the 55th Wing. The three work full-time for the 338th CTS, itself a relatively new training squadron.

Earning the awards were Maj. Scott Dowell, who was named the Instructor Pilot of the Quarter, Maj. Joe Conrad, who was named the Standardization and Evaluation Flight Examiner of the Quarter, and Capt. Russell Buzalko, who was named the Company Grade Officer of the Quarter. Conrad was also named the squadron's Standardization and Evaluation Flight Examiner of the Year for 2005.

According to Rauch, who has served as commander of the 338th CTS for approximately 15 months, the fact that the three Air Guard instructors did so well is a tribute to how well the National Guard and Active Air Force have seamlessly merged at Offutt since the Guard unit began standing up several years ago.

Rauch said that he currently has approximately 10 full and part-time Guardsmen serving in his squadron, which is responsible for a wide variety of instruction including teaching new pilots, navigators, electronic warfare officers and enlisted crew members to operate the RC-135 aircraft. The squadron is also responsible for providing upgrade training for crewmembers ascending into cockpit leadership positions, and training instructor pilots to teach others to fly the aircraft.

"A lot of the people who are here are out of this (aircraft) platform," said Rauch, explaining that many of the members of the 170th OSS actually joined the Guard directly from the 55th Wing. "They already knew each other, so there really was never a chance for an 'Us' versus 'Them' climate to establish."



Photo by Capt. Kevin Hynes

Award-Winning Airmen: (From left) Maj. Scott Dowell, Maj. Joe Conrad and Capt. Russell Buzalko by their squadron logo at Offutt Air Force Base. The three Nebraska Air National Guardsmen each earned quarterly awards in 2005 while serving as instructors at the 332th Combat Training Squadron. The Guardsmen are members of the Guard's 170th Operational Support Squadron.

"It seems like it's been an effort on both sides – both active and Guard – to just do the right thing," said Rauch. "I don't want to say that the Guard is our only source of stability, because we have a number of lieutenant colonels who are here on their final tours, which means that we will keep them for five or more years. But the Guard definitely does provide us with increased stability."

Dowell, who is responsible for teaching pilots to fly the RC-135, has actually served at Offutt since 1995. He said that he decided to join the newly forming Guard unit two years ago because it offered him a chance to continue doing a job he enjoyed.

"Stability was the main reason," he said. "Also, I fit a need here in Nebraska that I was happy to be a part of. I was already qualified, so I was able to start immediately."

According to Dowell, he and other squadron instructors are responsible for taking brand new pilots and teaching them the complicated responsibilities of flying the multi-engined RC-135.

"When they go through their (initial) pilot training, it's a very enclosed picture... they're focused on the one airframe they're flying and the basics of flying."

"When they come here, it's a much bigger airplane," he added. "We start working on their decision-making pro-

cess where they have a very structured box of what they're supposed to do in response to certain things. We teach them to think outside that box and become experts."

Like Dowell, Conrad joined the Air Guard unit approximately two years ago. He had served at Offutt from 1993 until 1998 when he left active duty and joined the Air Force Reserves so he could pursue a job with a commercial airline. He decided to come back to Offutt in 2003 when he heard about the new Guard unit that was forming.

"It was a chance to move back home," he said. "My wife was from Nebraska and had family in the area, and our kids were born here. Plus, it was a chance to come back and fly a plane that I'd flown before."

As a standardization and evaluation flight evaluator – better known as a SEFE – Conrad said he's responsible for taking new and upgrade students and evaluating their skills in both a simulator setting and during actual flights. He said that some of the students are occasionally surprised to learn that he and other instructors are actually Guardsmen, identifiable only by the additional Guard patch they wear on their shoulders of their flight suits.

"I don't think it's a big deal," he said. "Most of the guys and gals understand that we've got a wealth of experience

that we're bringing to the table, whether its from having flown this airplane for ten years, or being able to say that we've flown four different types of airplane in the Air Force or been out in the Airlines."

"It's a boost to them because they get to see more and they get to experience more," he added, saying that's true for both the Guard and active duty instructors who all have a tremendous amount of flying experience.

Conrad said that experience is especially important when teaching young pilots – who often have only flown in single or two-engine aircraft – to fly the much larger and complicated RC-135.

"We take them from baby aviators and really make them into what they are when they graduate into combat mission ready pilots," he said.

Like the two senior instructors, Buzalko also served at Offutt for several years prior to joining the Guard in 2004. He said the Guard offered him a chance stay at Offutt.

"I like the 55th Wing and flying the RC," said Buzalko, who had been stationed at Offutt for about seven-and-a-half years. "I liked what the Guard unit here was doing...integrating into the 338th and the 55th like a seamless partner."

"I thought that was a perfect fit more me," he added.

So perfect, in fact, that on the day Buzalko joined the Guard he remained in the same chair doing the same job that he had a day earlier in the active Air Force.

Today, Buzalko is a jack-of-all-trades. Along with serving as an instructor navigator and evaluator, he is also the squadron's executive officer and resource advisor. Buzalko said he loves serving in an organization like the 338th, which is filled with some of the base's top pilots and instructors.

"This unit is unusual just because of the caliber of people you have, both from the active duty and the Guard," he said. "At any given time, the awards could go to all active duty or almost all Guard because the people here are so equal in quality."

"Otherwise they wouldn't be in the flying training unit."

Buzalko said he has enjoyed being a Guard officer ever since he switch over.

"I like the stability of the 170th OSS and the Guard in general," he said. "Everybody tends to know each other a little bit better than a normal, regular Air Force unit."

"Granted, this unit's only been around for a few years, but most of us knew each other before we switched over to the Guard," he added. "And that thing they say about the Guard being family...it's definitely true."

Western Nebraska units participate in February quick reaction exercise

By David Nore

Public Information Officer

Approximately 70 Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers assigned to the 1057th Light/Medium Truck Company spent the Feb. 11-12 weekend training in critical homeland defense skills culminating in a Sunday morning practical exercise at Scottsbluff.

The training is part of an annual requirement for many Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers called Quick Reaction Force training.

The exercise was designed to prepare Nebraska Army

Guard Soldiers for a variety of homeland defense missions they could encounter as members of the Guard. The training included protection of critical public infrastructure, riot control and rules regarding use of force.

During the Sunday mid-morning practical exercise the Guardsmen practiced a variety of homeland defense skills while confronted with a force of civilian agitators and demonstrators. Specially trained Guardsmen played the part of the civilians during the training.

The 1057th is based in Chadron and Scottsbluff.

Free Turbo Tax feature proves popular among Defense Department filers

WASHINGTON (AFPS) – A partnership that enables military members and their families to file their tax returns electronically without charge is proving tremendously popular, with 103,000 returns already filed as of Feb. 7, a Military OneSource official told the American Forces Press Service.

"That's a big response," the official said.

More than 97,000 people filed their returns electronically within the first 20 days after being offered free access to Turbo Tax software, she said. Military OneSource and Intuit, a financial services company, are partnering to offer the Turbo Tax basic product for both federal and state returns at no cost.

In addition to active-duty members and their families, National Guard and Reserve

members and their family members also have access the program, regardless of their activation status. Deployed DoD civilians and their families also qualify.

Users can access the software through the Military OneSource Web site. A simple, secure, step-by-step system allows them to save, print and send completed tax forms electronically to the Internal Revenue Service, officials said.

While the Defense Department has a long history of offering tax help to military members, this is the first time DoD has offered the opportunity for them to self-file electronically.

Another free service enables military members and families to make toll-free calls to tax experts from any deployment location in the world, Jan Burke, deputy undersecretary of De-

fense for Military Community and Family Policy, said in announcing the program in January. The toll-free number is (800) 342-9647.

More phone numbers for people living overseas, non-English speakers and people with disabilities are posted on the Military OneSource Web site. That service could come in particularly handy this year due to deployments and other circumstances that affect taxable income, Army Lt. Col. Janet Fenton, executive director of the Armed Forces Tax Council, said recently.

For example, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo all qualify as combat zones where military income is tax exempt. In addition, a recent change in the tax code provides provisions for victims of hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma.

Retiree Memorial Chronicles

A page from the Nebraska Air National Guard history

Retired Air Guardsman oversees election in former soviet republic

By Chief Master Sgt. Vicky Cerino
Staff Writer

He met all the necessary requirements to deploy overseas. Only this time, he wasn't in a military uniform or wearing ear plugs when he boarded the flight overseas. Retired Senior Master Sgt. Burdette Burkhart was going to the Republic of Kazakhstan to participate in an International Election Observation Mission for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Burkhart, a former member of the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Civil Engineering Squadron who received only an expense-pay incentive, left Lincoln on a Monday in late November and arrived 12 time zones later on a Wednesday in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to begin orientation sessions for his mission.

Burkhart and 450 other volunteers would monitor the country's second democratic election Dec. 4.

Kazakhstan, located in Central Asia, borders Russia to the north, China to the east, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, to the south. Under Soviet rule, it was the largest of the Soviet territories. The country is about four times the size of Texas, Burkhart said.

The goal of the country of 16 million was to meet OSCE requirements by conforming to such international commitments as fundamental rights of freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly, and other international standards for democratic elections. OSCE also monitors United States' elections.

"The people want to become part of the international and European community," Burkhart said.

"As part of that, they have to have free and democratic elections."

Burkhart said the country very much wants to be recognized as a democracy. Along with that status go opportunities for a variety of funding.

With 55 states drawn from Europe, Central Asia and America, the OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization which offers a forum for political negotiations and decision-making in the fields of early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. It helps put the political will of the participating states into practice through its unique network of field missions, according to its website.

Burkhart's international travel began while still a member of the Air Guard. A retired Lincoln police officer, he signed up for a temporary assignment in 1998 to train police officers in Bosnia for the United Nations, following that country's civil war. It was there he first became aware of OSCE and election monitoring.

On election missions alone he's traveled to four countries since 1998. He traveled to Bosnia to monitor his first democratic election and then to Kosovo

and Macedonia before his latest trip, Nov. 28 to Dec. 7, to Kazakhstan.

In a country where the majority of Kazakhstanis are 53.4 percent Kazak, 30 percent Russian, and the rest a mixture of Ukrainian, Uzbek, German, Tatar, Uyгур and other ethnicities, people there knew Burkhart wasn't one of them. Kazakh (Qazaq) is the state language of which 64.4 percent of the population speaks. Russian, however, is officially used in everyday speech by about 95 percent of the people. Literacy rate is 98 percent.

Once Burkhart received several days of orientation in Almaty, Kazakhstan, he and 24 other colleagues boarded a prop plane for a four-hour flight to their area of responsibility.

"That was an experience in of itself," Burkhart said. "The tires were bald. In the middle of the flight, all of a sudden the pilot and co-pilot go back to the back of the plane and smoke cigarettes. We all looked at each other and were thinking the same thing ... 'Who's flying this thing?'"

Arriving in Kostanai - an area that stretched into part of Siberia - Burkhart's group stayed at a hotel for \$15 a night. The group then fanned out across the vast flatland area working in pairs of two.

Burkhart and his German counterpart, Ulrike Schuler, were responsible for 62 polling stations.

"It's impossible to hit them all. It's like going from Seward to York (about 25 miles), from one town to the next," he said.

The two were accompanied by a translator, Natasha Mukhamedchina, and a driver, Vasilii.

With checklists in hand, the two were responsible for documenting elections in as many towns as possible.

"You've got to really be flexible because you could end up in an environment you're unaccustomed to," Burkhart said. "All the towns were rural and had electricity, but no running water. They got their water from wells."

As they went from town to town, they learned about the people and culture of Kazakhstan. "Everywhere we went they would invite us for all the food. They had a table with all this different food. It was impolite to say 'no.'"

"Election day ends up kind of like a big party. After we were done eating, they'd want us to have a shot of vodka. You have to fight them off 'cause one isn't in their vocabulary. I probably drank more vodka in one day than I'll probably drink the rest of my life."

Burkhart said many people had never had an American in their village. Some asked him questions like: "How many cars do you have? How big is your house? They think we live in houses as big as the one on the television show 'Dallas.' They ask about United States elections. They knew where Nebraska was."

"They wanted to know what kinds of food we eat and about our families. A lot of the younger people dream about coming to the U.S."



Photos courtesy of Richard Burkhart
Land of The Big Red: Retired Senior Master Sgt. Burdette Burkhart stands in Fedorovka, Kazakhstan, next to a statue of Vladimir Lenin, founder of the former Soviet Republics and the Communist International, and organizer of the October Revolution in Russia.

Burkhart said he found it interesting that the people in each town they arrived at knew where he and his colleague were from. He said they wouldn't tell anyone where they were going when they'd leave a polling station but, he said, "We'd get close to a town and here would be this guy waving us down. I thought it strange."

He said he also found it interesting that after traveling for more than 100 miles, they never crossed a bridge or river.

Other items also intrigued him. Statues of Lenin are still prominent. Collective farms, born from Soviet influence, were the norm. He saw former KGB offices and a lot of World War II monuments in memory of the more than 20 million Russians who died during the war.

"A lot of communist ways are still prevalent," Burkhart said. "After some 80 years it takes a while to get away from it. Democracy is new to them. I think they want it."

The Kazakhstanis gained independence from Russia in 1991. President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who once was chairman of the communist Supreme Soviet, was elected president in December 1991. He was one of five candidates running for office during the Dec. 4 election.

Burkhart said at one polling station, a man he later found out was Mongolian, kept staring at him. "He was building up enough nerve to ask me questions. When he finally came over to me, he asked me a ton of questions. He went on and on asking about the people, and even the weather. It was enjoyable. I was the first American he'd ever met."

Once the election was over, which turned out more than 92 percent of voters, incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev, was re-elected with about 90 percent of the vote, Burkhart said. However, Kazakhstan did not meet a number of OSCE commitments and standards for democratic elections.

"This is only their second time of conducting elections. We have a 235-year head start on them," Burkhart said. "They are heading in the right direction. They just need some guidance."

He said by far the best OSCE duty to date was his most recent. "It went just like clockwork," Burkhart said, speaking about the logistics of making such a trip work. OSCE makes all arrangements and schedules for them.

What calls Burkhart back time-and-time again is the travel and adventure, the nice people he meets and the feeling he's promoting freedom. It wasn't the money. Volunteers, who must meet requirements to serve, only have their roundtrip airline paid for and \$1,200 for all expenses, including hotel, food, and driver, which was \$400 alone.

There is one thing that sticks in his mind today about his work monitoring elections.

He will never forget the first election he was involved in.

While in Bosnia a man went up to him crying. "He said 'Thank you for giving me my freedom.' I didn't know what he was talking about at first."

Burkhart then realized the man was referring to NATO intervening in Bosnia to halt a humanitarian catastrophe and restore stability the region.

"I'll always remember him."



International Observers: Retired Senior Master Sgt. Burdette Burkhart stands with his driver, Vasilii (far left), his German colleague, Ulrike Schuler, and translator, Natasha Mukhamedchina.



Rural Kazakhstan: Many of the towns Burdette Burkhart traveled to in Kazakhstan resembled this street in a small, rural village.



Guard Family NEWS You Can Use

Successful reunions take careful thought

By Maj. Drey Ihm
Family Program Office

Deployment is one of the inevitabilities of military life.

While the separation can be difficult, the transition from deployment to homecoming can be equally as stressful.

The stress can be minimized with the assistance from the Family Program Office. Being sensitive to a service member's expectations and needs upon return from deployment includes simple things like changes in the home environment, furniture arrangement, closet space and spouse's appearance.

People will have certain expectations and needs as they plan the day a loved one returns. But while picking out the perfect reunion outfit, don't forget a spouse's needs as well.

Here are some things to keep in mind for a reunion.

♦ **Be Patient.** Having a spouse or loved one home again will bring lives back into harmony with each other eventually, but it is not an overnight or easily accomplished task;

♦ **Don't Change Everything.** They want to come home to the same person they left. Changes are good, but don't choose the day before the return to make all of them.

A spouse needs to come back to some things that remain unchanged from when he or she left. They need that familiarity when they return. It may have been the very thought of home, as they remembered it, that got them through some tough or challenging times.

♦ **Give 'Em Space.** Make sure that when they return, it looks like they still live there.

Taken over the entire closet? Give them their space back before they arrive home. If stowing away some favorite items while they are gone, make sure to pull them out before the homecoming.

♦ **Honey Dos and Don'ts.** "Honey-do" lists never receive a round of applause, especially when presented within 48 hours of a spouse's return. Wait a while before hitting them with a list longer than the kids' Christmas wish list. On the same note, keep up the routine tasks during the deployment. Six months of lawn growth in the backyard or mold in the bathroom is not a very nice welcome home gift.

♦ **A Sense of Loss for Moments Missed.** Service members may grieve for what they missed. Given the world climate now, those missed moments may be even more tender. First words, first steps, or a first prom are all big moments in children's lives that can happen while deployed. Children may begin driving or dating during the time the deployed parent is gone.

These things are landmarks by which a parent remembers a child's childhood, and the service member may feel the loss of these events acutely. Deployed parents who miss these moments need time and understanding to adjust to the growth and changes in the family.

♦ **Finding Your Family's Balance.** Military families need to be independent and carry on with life while their loved one is gone. When they arrive home, he or she sees family routines that have been established without them. Events and activities go on without missing a beat. It could make them question where they fit in the family. Servicemen and women need reassurance they are needed, wanted and appreciated.

Conveying the message that life is much sweeter when they are home, while reassuring them that the family won't fall apart when they leave, may seem like walking a tight rope, however, it is as simple as saying, "We really missed you. It was fun, but it would have been perfect if you could have been here."

Let your spouse know that they were dearly missed, but don't dwell on the fact that they weren't there.

♦ **The Husband/Wife Connection.** Reconnecting with a spouse on an intimate and sexual level is typically at the forefront of every Service person's thoughts — the spouse's, too. Re-establishing intimacy is different from re-establishing a sexual relationship. Intimacy needs quiet time together to share personal thoughts and feelings. It takes time, patience and understanding.

Some couples need more time to adjust than others. They need to get to know each other again. Sometimes physical feelings may have been suppressed. Help your partner understand what you're feeling, so that he or she does not view this needed time as rejection.

♦ **Communicate.** Talking and listening to the needs of a partner and allowing time to adjust to life with the family again may take a while, but it will happen. As you and your military spouse face the military missions of today, be assured that deployment will be a part of it.

As each deployment ends with a reunion, together you will help your family find its stride.

Life will once again take on a familiar, steady pace.

Education Notebook

■ National Guard membership worth thousands in educational assistance

By Chief Warrant Officer Robyn Huskey
State Education Officer

Let's stop and estimate the value of membership in the Nebraska Army National Guard.

There are 21 federal Army National Guard education programs as well as Nebraska's state-funded program listed in www.virtualarmory.com under the "education" tab.

♦ \$20,000 Student Loan Repayment Program or Health Professions Loan Repayment of \$50,000;

♦ \$4,500 annually for Federal Tuition Assistance x six years = \$27,000;

♦ Reserve GI Bill entitlement: 36 fulltime student months or 72 halftime student months or 144 quarter time months, status, etc = \$10,692 at today's rates (increases each year);

♦ Army National Guard GI Bill Kicker (if in select Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) or units): \$200 x 36 (critical MOSs or units) or \$350 x 36 (officer candidates) = \$12,600 max;

♦ Dedicated Army National Guard Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship or GRFD ROTC scholarship: 2, 3, or 4 year at approximately \$17,000 annually;

♦ Free Testing of ACTs, SATs, GRE's, GMAT's, PSST's, CLEPs, DSSTs, etc. CLEPs and DSSTs also free for Spouse. Each could be worth from \$60 to \$300;

♦ State-funded education programs; tuition assistance. This is in addition to any of the federal programs, which the state of Nebraska program allows;

♦ If prior service from active Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force, or if the member becomes (an Active, Guard, Reserve) employee, then they also qualify for Active Duty GI Bill at 36 months fulltime student rate or 72 months of halftime student rate or 144 months of quarter time student rate, etc. \$37,224 at today's rates (increases each year);

♦ If a Soldier is mobilized for 90-plus continuous days in support of Global War on Terrorism for such operations as Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, etc., he or she then becomes eligible for new "mobilization GI Bill" (Ch 1607) of 36 months of fulltime student rate or 72 months of halftime student rate or 144 months of quarter time student rate, etc. Rates are dependent on length of mobilization tour: 90+ days, one-year plus, or two-years plus. Maximum amount is \$29,779 at today's rates (increases each year);

♦ There are many other programs that may be hard to assign monetary figures, such as degree planning, military credit analysis and transfer, Student Guide to Success, Troops to Teacher and Spouse to Teacher.

Please see www.virtualarmory.com under the "education" tab's "federal benefits" and click on the "federal benefits summary".

Servicemembers can have up to 36 months of each GI Bill program or a total of 48 months of fulltime, 96 halftime or 192 quarter time, etc months of GI Bill benefits.... if they are eligible (combine) for more than one of the three basic GI Bill programs; i.e. Reserve GI Bill, Active Duty GI Bill, or Mobilization GI Bill. ARNG GI Bill Kicker's 36 months may be used with any of the three.

For additional information concerning these programs — please call (402)309-7313 or by email me at robyn.huskey@ne.ngb.army.mil.

Commitment to total integrity linchpin to great leadership

Maj. Gen. Roger P. Lempke
Adjutant General

In the two-day seminar I conduct called "Leaders Leading," participants are asked to list important features they look for in leaders. Integrity is always among the first traits recorded.

William Cohen's first universal law of leadership happens to be: Maintain absolute integrity. A leadership basis with integrity as a key feature is probably a good one. But too often integrity is simply seen as a higher form of honesty.

Integrity is "... the quality or state of being complete; unbroken condition; wholeness; entirety."

This is the main definition from Webster's Dictionary.

Two other words linked to integrity are simplicity and soundness. I believe people look for both honesty and integrity in a leader. Honesty implies a

trust in what the leader says and does. Integrity is more about predictability of character and actions.

During my flying days a fellow instructor pilot always intrigued me. A young captain like me, this individual possessed many fine qualities, but no one seemed to like him—student pilots or other instructor pilots. Jim (not his real name) took great pride in being honest to a fault: a commendable and difficult quality to sustain. But he always seemed to be in conflict with someone or the organization.

It puzzled me during my time around him how such a moral individual could be in so much conflict all this time.

Years later I came to realize that Jim's problem was that his commitment to a singular principle lacked depth and connection.

LEMPKE ON LEADERSHIP

His quest for pure honesty caused great turmoil in him when issues not exactly "black and white" confronted him.

His actions and decisions often seemed irrational and inconsistent.

The label on him was that he was not to be trusted. How could someone so completely committed to absolute honesty *not* be trusted?

The simple fact was, Jim lacked understanding of the many elements that make an ethical person.

A good leader is predictable and consistent in matters big and small. Wholeness exists that naturally drives a leader to consider all aspects of situations from a consistent set of inherently understood values.

Integrity isn't a badge for flashing in front of everyone at

opportune times—it's an aura of completeness. Mistakes and bad decisions don't imply a lack of integrity. It's what happens next that does.

The drive to correct these mistakes and seek to prevent them from happening again demonstrates a commitment to living with integrity.

Integrity is the package of honesty, ethical behavior, forthrightness and a host of other desirable qualities that guides our every action. People look for a consistency of conduct in their leaders.

Leaders who insists on error-free expense reports but fudge their own are not only dishonest, but inconsistent.

This is a good example because it exhibits another important aspect of integrity—it's the little things that count. High integrity is most pointedly demonstrated when you do the right

thing when no one is watching.

When you are in a leadership position though, someone is generally watching. Therefore, a good leader continually hones a sincere sense of integrity that is a part of a total being.

In my civilian and military career I've come to admire a great many leaders with admirably integrity. I've known none that were perfect. Nor can I claim that high honor. But all strove to improve, to learn from the past and do better the next day. They would openly seek forgiveness for past missteps and work hard to prevent recurrences.

Fortunately, I've been associated only a few times with leaders shifty and devious. Upon realizing their lack of integrity I moved quickly to get out from under them.

Maintaining absolute integrity is the necessary linchpin to becoming a great leader.

Cavalry Soldiers train for war at Fort Polk

Keeping A Look Out: Soldiers of the 1-167th Cavalry provide dismounted security and suspiciously watch for potential dangers while stopped near a mock village at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk La.

Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke and state Command Sgt. Maj. Tom Shunk recently visited a portion of the approximately 300 Nebraska Soldiers 1-167th Cavalry commanded by Lt. Col. Marty Apprich, part of the 1/34th Brigade Combat Team, who were training in Louisiana for a deployment to Iraq.

Look for more photographs of the Soldiers' training in the April *Prairie Soldier*.



Photo by David Nore

Family members encouraged to safeguard critical information

Family members play a vital role in the success of military operations.

Family members may not know it, but they also play a crucial role in ensuring their loved ones' safety by safeguarding what they know of the military's day-to-day operations. It is important that both family and military members understand what comprises critical information and are familiar with what the military calls "Operational Security," or more simply, OPSEC.

In short, OPSEC is a method designed to keep potential enemies from discovering critical Department of Defense information such as when units are mobilizing, where they are traveling or what processes are involved.

As the name suggests, OPSEC protects U.S. operations. Success depends on secrecy and surprise so the military can accomplish its missions more quickly and with less risk. Potential adversaries, and even friendly nations, want this information. They may also look to family members to get critical information.

What does OPSEC mean for family members?

Be Alert:

Be aware that you may receive unsolicited phone calls or e-mails from individuals asking about your loved one's deployed location, flight schedule and what they are doing while they are deployed. Don't answer these questions unless they are immediate family members.

Be Careful:

There may be times when your spouse or loved one cannot talk about the specifics of his or her job. It's understandable that someone back home will want to know everything about what a family member is doing while they are deployed.

However, don't press your loved one for this information. Remember, something as simple as a phone discussion concerning where your spouse or loved one is going could be very useful to U.S. adversaries.

Be careful with e-mails sent by your spouse or loved one. Do not forward

Protecting Yourself

By Master Sgt. Jason Schroeder
Air Guard Anti-Terrorism/Force
Protection Office

these on to people you don't know if they contain critical information.

And remember that determined individuals can easily collect information from cordless and cellular phones.

Protect Critical Information:

Critical information is not classified, but it does deal with specific facts about military intentions, capabilities, operations or activities. If an adversary knew this detailed information, U.S. mission accomplishment and the safety of personnel could be jeopardized.

By being a member of the military family, you will often know some bits of critical information. Do not discuss critical information outside of your immediate family and especially not over the phone or through emails.

Examples of Critical Information include:

- Detailed information about mission(s) of assigned units;
- Details concerning locations and times of unit deployments;
- Personnel transactions that occur in large numbers (e.g., pay information, power of attorney, wills, or deployment information);
- References to trend in unit morale or personnel problems;
- Family members' personal information;
- Details concerning security procedures. Pay particular attention to pictures that may be sent back home from a deployed location and remember, adversaries can discern security positions and operations from pictures sent home via emails.

Please contact the following for more information: Capt. Ryan Earleywine, Nebraska Army National Guard, at (402) 309-7406; Master Sgt. Jason Schroeder, Nebraska Air National Guard Antiterrorism Noncommissioned Officer, at (402) 309-1565.

Warrant officers encouraged to aid in state-wide recruiting effort

Greetings from deep inside the inner workings of the The Adjutant General's building.

I was recently appointed to the state command chief warrant officer full-time position effective Jan. 1. It is a great honor for me to serve you, my fellow warrant officers, Major General Lempke, Nebraska and the nation in this capacity.

My thanks to Chief Warrant Officer Steve Loftis for his leadership as the command chief and all the transition training he has given me.

This past year has been a year of unprecedented change and Chief Warrant Officer Loftis has done a yeoman's job managing the changes.

Currently our Warrant Officer Corps in Nebraska is 66 percent of authorized strength. Filling our ranks with qualified professional Soldiers is our most immediate and critical challenge. Accordingly General Lempke's top priority is "Every Soldier a Recruiter." I challenge all warrant officers to do two things (1) get actively engaged in recruiting to fill our vacant warrant officer positions and (2) take one more important step and recruit a Soldier into the Nebraska Army National Guard.

This scenario would be a "Win-Win" situation for the Warrant Corps and the Nebraska Army Guard. All senior warrant officers who have noticed or observed a Soldier with the technical skills and the leadership qualities it takes to become a warrant officer, please take the time to encourage these Soldiers to join the best ranks in the Army.

For a list of vacant positions and prerequisites please direct interested soldiers to our website at www.neguard.com.

Once there click on "take me directly to State CCWO" then click on "Available Warrant Officer Positions" and prerequisites for the job.

The good news is we have ten warrant officer candidates in the training pipeline and at least 20 prospective Soldiers who are currently working on the pre-requisites for completing pre-determination packets.

Chief's Business

By Chief Warrant Officer Steve Weber
Command Chief Warrant Officer

Soldiers interested in becoming aviator warrant officers (pilots) are encouraged to talk with Lt. Col. Richard Dahlman, state Army aviation officer, at (402) 309-1818 or e-mail him at richard.dahlman@us.army.mil. Soldiers interested in becoming a non aviator warrant officer should contact our full-time officer strength manager, Chief Warrant Officer John Ayers, at (402) 309-7342. E-mail him at john.p.ayers@us.army.mil.

Soldiers interested in a Warrant Officer career may also contact me at (402) 309-7074. E-mail me at steven.lloyd.weber@us.army.mil.

Please join me in congratulating our first Warrant Officer Candidate School graduate of 2006, Warrant Officer Becky Betts who is assigned to the Joint Forces Headquarters (Nebraska) deputy chief of staff for Information Systems Management. Betts will be very instrumental in training and preparing future warrant officer candidates.

Also congratulate newly assigned warrant officers: Warrant Officer Todd Wagner, Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 734th Transportation Battalion, Warrant Officer Torrey Baker, 267th Ordnance Company, and Chief Warrant Officer Keith Osterhaut, who is mobilizing with 24th Medical Company (Air Ambulance).

Warrant officers, as we step up to the challenge to fill our ranks, let's remember to step out and be visible professional leaders. Commanders need our support and need to hear our voice. We are no longer a corps of "quiet professionals."

Let's create a Warrant Officer Corps that treats everyone with respect, a respectful Warrant Corps where Soldiers will eagerly want to serve.

I look forward to working with all Soldiers and look forward to our success in recruiting.

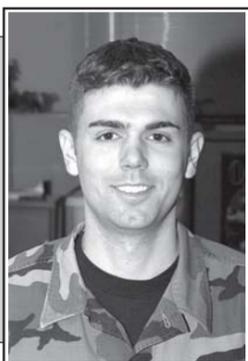
Street Talk

"If you were talking to a person interested in the Guard, what would be the number one benefit you would say the Nebraska National Guard offers?"



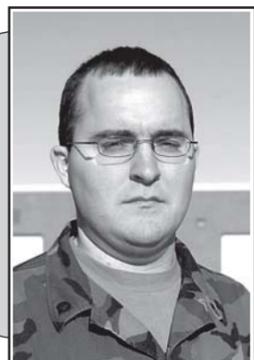
Spc. Tiffany Shotkoski
267th Ordnance Company
"The job experience and the training that the Guard offers throughout basic training, advanced individual training and monthly drills."

Senior Airman Christopher Bauer
155th Mission Support Flight
"The friends that you make and the relationships that you build with people from a variety of backgrounds."



Spc. Faiymeen Nichols
155th Personnel Detachment
"It is the easiest part-time job out there. Plus, the reenlistment bonuses are unbeatable and constantly increasing."

Airman 1st Class Katherine Linden
155th Mission Support Group
"The tuition assistance program with the benefit of traveling to places that most people don't get to see."



Spc. Dustin Jamison
267th Ordnance Company
"The tuition assistance and the GI Bill. I haven't taken out any student loans because the National Guard covers my tuition, books and I even have some spending money, so I don't have to get a job. I can focus on school."

Senior Airman Jimmy Ton
155th Air Refueling Wing
"Tuition assistance and the experience and training for my job."



Militia concept must be preserved

There is something that needs to come off my chest.

I've been newsworthy a fair amount lately because of my position as president of the Adjutants General Association of the United States (AGAUS). People mention seeing me on CSPAN or the local news or quoted in national or local news media.

I'm always flattered; and a few seconds of fame every so often can become intoxicating. It is easy to see how people can succumb to sound bite over substance.

I sought a position of some national prominence in hopes of influencing the future of the National Guard during what I believe to be a critical time in our nation's history.

This great nation was built on two great institutions—the Constitution and the militia (the Citizen-Soldier). The Constitution has its own diversified group of defenders. But the militia became less prominent when a large standing professional military force continued after World War II in response to the Soviet threat and throughout the Cold War.

The need then for a large standing force and a strategic reserve (which the militia became) was obvious.

When the Cold War ended the nation entered an era in which some thought that military reductions were in order. Funding previously spent on the military would become a "peace dividend."

This would have been an ideal time to emphasize again the nation's militia heritage. The National Guard is the most cost-effective military compo-

The Adjutant General
Major General

Roger P. Lempke



nent this nation has. militia forces is underestimated.

But I do know, thanks to you.

I see the strain on Nebraska National Guard service members from taking more than a year out of their lives

to serve full time for a noble cause. I see what this does to their families. Strong as Nebraskans are, the pain is often all too obvious. I see the pride felt from serving, but I also see the confusion resulting from choosing to live one kind of life and then for extended periods of time being forced to live another.

The militia takes up arms when called, but goes home as soon as the fighting is over. But definable limits on the war against terrorism do not exist. This we know: continued use of the militia will be necessary during the turbulent times ahead. So it must be manned to ensure our Citizen-Soldiers remain just that.

My national role has been to fight for militia rights—to put it simply. The militia concept must be preserved. It cannot become unreasonably overburdened by well-meaning, but ill advised decisions that seek redirection of funds when instead National Guard manpower should be kept at current levels, and perhaps increased.

I enlisted a young man a few weeks ago and met his family. I want to see him experience the full patriotic experience of serving in the National Guard without being unduly over-tasked and driven away.

So when cameras are rolling and I am for a fleeting moment the center of news this young man and that precious national treasure we call the militia is always on my mind.

Instead, our military establishment sought to generally sustain Cold War type forces and equipment. In fact, during the mid-nineties the Adjutants General and National Guard Association fought a lengthy period to preclude plans to dramatically reduce Army National Guard force structure.

It is this force structure saved back then that has kept militia rotations to Iraq to one year instead of maybe two or more. It is this force structure that was available to provide over 50,000 National Guard service members to support Hurricane Katrina recovery while simultaneously supporting operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations in the World.

Today no one disputes the value of our great militia—citizens trained and ready to step to defend our nation. Yet even as most indicators point to needing more ground forces for stabilization operations and confronting terrorism in new areas of the world, serious proposals are on the table to actually reduce militia numbers in the Army and Air Force.

Unfortunately, these proposals emanate from those needing the militia the most, but without understanding its delicate nature. In particular, they do not understand the potential far-reaching and devastating impacts on the National Guard if the nation's need for

Soldiers' success during bloody ambush incubated during countless hours of training

This month, we begin the first of the three-part series documenting the March 20, 2005, ambush of a 1075th Transportation Company convoy near the town of Salmon Pak, Iraq.

The ambush that day was one of the largest and bloodiest battles in Nebraska National Guard history since World War II.

In researching the ambush and in interviewing the key players involved, it became evident that this battle offers some very key lessons that can be applied in today's current mobilization environment.

In this first part, probably the biggest lesson is the fact that training works. Throughout the interviews, it became evident to me that when everything went wrong for the members of Convoy 678 – and there were a lot of things that went wrong – people kept their cool, kept thinking and ultimately figured out a way to get things done. That just didn't happen. It was created through countless exercises, training and simple hard work.

Often, many members of Convoy 678 told me, the pre- and post-mobilization training scenarios they completed seemed overdone, over-analyzed and over-rehearsed. What that training did, however, was help each

individual member of that team better understand not only his or her role, but also the roles of the other members of their team. It gave them a level of confidence in their individual and collective abilities that proved to become one of the decisive critical factors of the battle.

Another interesting lesson is the fact that – as the second part of this series will show – individual initiative was a critical factor in getting Convoy 678 extricated from the confusion of the traffic jam and out of the bloody kill zone. Again, that initiative didn't just happen. It was created and incubated, say members of the unit, during the countless hours spent training at the Greenleaf Training Center, Fort Riley, Kan., and finally in Kuwait prior to taking on the mission.

Take training seriously. Work hard to understand individual and a team's collective responsibilities. And, don't get tunnel vision by simply focusing on an individual role.

Instead, look outside of the

My Turn

Editor, Prairie Soldier

Kevin J. Hynes



figurative "box" by thinking creatively and imaginatively about the "what ifs" and then how to deal with those unforeseen factors when they do occur.

Last December's *Prairie Soldier* newspaper was definitely not one of my best achievements. As many readers already know, there were several "major" mistakes. Wrong dates. Wrong names in a promotion list. Misidentification of a late Soldier.

Of all the mistakes I made, the one that I'm most sorry for is the misidentification of the late 1st Sgt. Bob Hall as retired 1st Sgt. Ron Hall. Misidentification of names is always a serious business in newspapers because it involves a failure of trust. People trust the newspaper to be accurate and in this case, I failed to do just that.

However, it took a heart-felt letter from the late first sergeant's son for me to really understand the implications that the failure caused.

When I misidentified 1st Sgt. Bob Hall I also served to nullify all that he did, all that he served for and all that he believed in.

I'm sorry for the mistake. I'm also thankful for the lesson I received.

AWARDS

Army National Guard

Legion of Merit
Sgt. Maj. Curtis L. Snoberger

Bronze Star Medal

Sgt. Michael D. Belleci
Pfc. Darin D. Nelson

Purple Heart

Sgt. 1st Class Johnny R. Eynetich
Sgt. 1st Class Douglas V. Manly
Sgt. Donne E. McKimney
Sgt. David T. Murphy
Sgt. Sion T. Odom
Pfc. Timothy D. Verbeek

Meritorious Service Medal

Col. Rodney D. Montag
Lt. Col. Michael D. Navrkal
Capt. Thomas R. Mortimer
1st Sgt. John B. Beavers
Sgt. 1st Class Kimberly D. Moore

Joint Service Commendation Medal

Maj. Robert J. Kadavy

Army Commendation Medal

Capt. Jeffrey C. Searcey (for Valor)
Capt. Grant W. Siedenburgh
1st Lt. Danial C. Edmonston
1st Lt. Matthew C. Misfeldt (for Valor)
1st Lt. Jacques S. Smith III (for Valor)
Chief Warrant Officer Jeffrey M. Klintberg
1st Sgt. Glenn A. Muhr
1st Sgt. John E. Quinn
Sgt. 1st Class Andrew J. Arellano
Sgt. 1st Class Brian E. Cleveland
Sgt. 1st Class Kimberly D. Moore
Staff Sgt. Megan A. Bowers
Staff Sgt. Patrick H. Closson
Staff Sgt. Ronald A. Davey
Staff Sgt. Maren C. Held
Staff Sgt. Jeffery A. Holbrook
Staff Sgt. Thomas W. Jones
Staff Sgt. Vincent E. Luhn
Staff Sgt. Randall L. McHugh
Staff Sgt. Robert R. Schwanz
Staff Sgt. Scott R. Stanley
Staff Sgt. William VanSetten
Staff Sgt. Gregory L. Wolff
Sgt. Joseph J. Dunlap (for Valor)
Sgt. Nichole M. Mueller
Sgt. Ryan E. Thompson
Pfc. Tyler T. Schik (for Valor)

Army Achievement Medal

Maj. Troy A. Paisley
Capt. Brett E. Petit
1st Lt. Monty R. Zeiler
2nd Lt. Jeremy D. Chancellor
2nd Lt. Kevin L. Janousek
2nd Lt. Jacques S. Smith III
Sgt. 1st Class Craig Brown
Sgt. 1st Class Douglas V. Manly
Staff Sgt. Shawn W. Banzhaf
Staff Sgt. Patrick Bruning

Staff Sgt. Gregory J. Clement
Staff Sgt. Sergio A. Diaz
Staff Sgt. Scott J. Hanna
Staff Sgt. Jeffrey A. Holbrook
Staff Sgt. Andrew J. Hytrek
Staff Sgt. Travis S. Menish
Staff Sgt. Morgan C. Muller
Staff Sgt. Steven M. Peterson
Staff Sgt. Tyler D. Powell
Staff Sgt. John R. Price Jr.
Staff Sgt. William R. Snelling
Staff Sgt. Henry A. Ysac
Sgt. William H. Carlson Jr.
Sgt. William R. DeWitt
Sgt. Scott D. French
Sgt. Jeff Hansen
Sgt. Gary M. Jacobsen
Sgt. Robert D. Jensen
Sgt. Scott H. Leach
Sgt. Karen R. Matheny
Sgt. Jay D. Mins
Sgt. Duane L. Owen Jr.
Sgt. Jeffrey S. Rexus
Sgt. Lucas J. Smith
Sgt. Daniel A. Taylor
Sgt. Oscar M. Valdez
Sgt. Todd B. Walton
Spc. Matthew J. Adams
Spc. Richard A. Bates
Spc. Jeremy s. Borrell
Spc. Randy A. Graves
Spc. Riley J. Gruntorad
Spc. Michael E. Hein
Spc. Robert G. Hinman
Spc. Lori L. Hoegerl
Spc. Patti S. Hoegerl
Spc. Adam L. Homan
Spc. Erick K. Johnson
Spc. Benjamin P. McDermott
Spc. Dane M. McGinley
Spc. Lance A. O'Bryan
Spc. Brittany S. Osborne
Spc. Ralph S. Reece
Spc. Larry D. Spargo Jr.
Spc. Seth M. Wiesen
Pfc. Staci E. Bowers
Pfc. Abraham B. Garcia
Pfc. Wayne L. Martin
Pfc. Kole W. Talkington
Pfc. Kevin S. Thomas
Pfc. Isaac R. Villafranca
Pvt. Nick R. Souksavath
Pvt. Trey W. Gothard

Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal
Lt. Col. Douglas R. Wilken

Nebraska National Guard Legion of Merit
Col. Rodney D. Montag

Nebraska National Guard Meritorious Service Medal
Col. Rodney D. Montag
Sgt. 1st Class Duane L. Johnson Jr.

Nebraska National Guard Individual Achievement Medal

2nd Lt. Raymond P. Phillips
Sgt. 1st Class Timothy S. James
Sgt. 1st Class Paul M. Kimble
Sgt. 1st Class Mark A. Pegues
Sgt. 1st Class Justin L. Schmitt
Sgt. 1st Class Kerry D. Wyatt
Staff Sgt. Nathan J. Avery
Staff Sgt. Jason D. Bennett
Staff Sgt. Gerald D. Bouska
Staff Sgt. Jack E. Camden
Staff Sgt. Lucuas R. Gerdes
Staff Sgt. Kirsten L. Jespersen
Staff Sgt. James C. Mendoza
Staff Sgt. Courtney L. Miller
Staff Sgt. Jerrimy A. Patzke
Staff Sgt. Cecilio T. Roman
Staff Sgt. Robert R. Schwanz
Staff Sgt. Chris Troshynski
Sgt. Clinton F. Brady
Sgt. Brandon S. Burton
Sgt. Timothy M. Buskirk
Sgt. Aaron A. Denton
Sgt. Bo R. Feltz
Sgt. Joseph C. Haag
Sgt. Timothy C. Harper
Sgt. Nels N. Huffman
Sgt. Keith P. McDermott
Sgt. Sarah M. Pannill
Sgt. Edward W. Pickinpaugh
Sgt. Christopher I. Russell
Sgt. Eugene Schroll
Sgt. Michael R. Steffen
Sgt. Dylan P. Welsh
Sgt. Mellisa R. Werner
Spc. Lori R. Barber
Spc. Nicholas M. Broshears
Spc. Aaron J. Graves
Spc. Russell W. Kelley
Spc. Joshua E. King
Spc. Aaron R. Krajicek
Spc. Brison G. Kuhn
Spc. Casey A. Loomis
Spc. Charles E. Moler
Spc. Simon D. Ritchie
Spc. Benjamin J. Schall
Spc. Damon J. Schlenker
Spc. Dustin K. Shonka
Spc. Peter M. Stout
Spc. Rachell M. Weisgerber
Pfc. Adam J. Hollinghead
Pfc. Andrew B. Iler
Pfc. Chad R. Lemmer
Pfc. Jessica J. Moody
Pfc. Michael W. Paz
Pfc. Ryan A. Zulkoski
Pvt. Gabriel C. Conrad

Air National Guard Meritorious Service Medal

Lt. Col. Thomas R. Dalton II
Maj. Kyle A. Hinkel
Maj. Jeffrey P. MatHEMEIER
Chief Master Sgt. Rachel M. Garten

Chief Master Sgt. Gary D. Hansel
Senior Master Sgt. Thomas D. LaFontaine
Senior Master Sgt. Jeffrey L. Mach
Senior Master Sgt. Donald W. Wiemer
Master Sgt. Dallas R. Clayton
Master Sgt. Judith M. Curran
Master Sgt. Lambert L. Larson
Master Sgt. Pamela D. McCloskey
Master Sgt. Alden F. Zrust

Air Force Commendation

Maj. Robert K. Barnhill
Capt. Anne M. Bredthauer
Capt. Carl A. Johnson
Capt. Christopher L. Hesse
Capt. Benjamin M. West
1st Lt. Nancy N. Curtis
1st Lt. Nicole D. McCoy
Senior Master Sgt. Michael C. Johnson
Senior Master Sgt. Raymond L. Kubert
Senior Master Sgt. Heidi R. Vontz
Master Sgt. Chad J. Bullis
Master Sgt. Kevin T. Daehling
Master Sgt. Lindell L. Failor
Master Sgt. Gary R. Lierz
Master Sgt. William J. Triplett
Master Sgt. Ricky A. Valenta
Tech. Sgt. Michael L. Buchholz
Tech. Sgt. Connie E. Cooper
Tech. Sgt. Anthony J. Hewitt
Tech. Sgt. Craig A. Hilderbrand
Tech. Sgt. Rhonda L. McClellan
Staff Sgt. Mark T. Durant
Staff Sgt. George L. Gonzalez
Staff Sgt. Sandi L. Harvey
Staff Sgt. Thomas R. Lannin
Staff Sgt. Lannie J. Lukes
Staff Sgt. Danielle A. Nuss
Staff Sgt. Matthew H. Roby
Staff Sgt. Paul M. Savick
Staff Sgt. Erica M. Wilson

Air Force Achievement Medal

Capt. Gregory C. Goodwater
1st Lt. Paul W. Erickson
Senior Master Sgt. Lee H. Straube
Master Sgt. Guy A. Boden
Master Sgt. Alan M. Brown
Master Sgt. Kenton E. Disney
Master Sgt. Kevin L. Nye
Tech. Sgt. Aaron D. Aulner
Tech. Sgt. Paul R. Buss
Tech. Sgt. Bradley P. Meyer
Tech. Sgt. Vernon L. Moore
Tech. Sgt. Ryan Roysse
Staff Sgt. Britton C. Wilson
Staff Sgt. Jeremy J. Dean
Staff Sgt. Steven R. Fisher
Staff Sgt. Nathan D. Ohlrich
Staff Sgt. Jared W. Olson

Nebraska National Guard Commendation Medal

Tech. Sgt. Stanley Mar

Nebraska National Guard Individual Achievement Medal

Senior Airman Eric A. Ford

PROMOTIONS

Army National Guard

Major
Shane M. Martin
Darin J. Mongeon
Thomas R. Mortimer III

Captain

Michael B. Ertz

Sergeant First Class

Daniel S. Mumm

Staff Sergeant

Julie M. Adams
Gabriel J. Stone

Sergeant

Kasey J. McCoy
Nathan J. Reicks
Patrick M. Schauer

Specialist

Aaron M. Aldridge
Gregory D. Boswell
Jon K. Carriker
Matthew J. Crable
Nicole A. Gaughan
Christopher M. Kruger
Richard S. Laschankzy
Chad R. Lemmer
Amber N. Monahan
Michael W. Paz
Cody L. Peters
Denier Y. Rivera

Private First Class

Justina M. Adair
Joshua A. Armon
Trey W. Gothard
Nicole M. Greve
Zachary A. Long

Cameron B. McPherson
Joseph A. Rott
Steven M. Schnell
Kraig O. Shaw
Timothy d. Sons

Private Two

Lance W. Bonar
Michael S. Booksmills
Everett C. Chadwick
Trevor W. Courter
Matthew J. Crable
Kelly B. Dodds
Michael J. Hogner
Andrew J. Johnson
Brent J. Johnston
Brody C. McLean
Colter D.L. Mozak
Sean M. O'Malley
Justin A. Novak
Zachery J. Richter
Joshua A. Schaaf
Kevin C. Stebbins
Andrew J. Tarr
Michael D. Victor
Justin A. Volkman

Air National Guard Senior Master Sergeant

Charles A. Kreifels

Master Sergeant

James A. Boeselager
Sherri Bejvancesky
Mary A. Baker
Kevin W. Doriocourt
Jamie M. Jakub
David A. Johnston
Matthe Mittelstadt
Myles E. Mongar
Jason L. Schroeder

RETIREMENTS

Army National Guard

Sgt. 1st Class Duane L. Johnson Jr.
Sgt. 1st Class Jimmie L. Meers

Air National Guard

Maj. Kyle A. Hinkel

Senior Master Sgt. Jeffrey L. Mach
Master Sgt. Dallas R. Clayton
Master Sgt. Norman P. Schaefer
Master Sgt. Alden F. Zrust
Tech. Sgt. Scott R. Capps
Tech. Sgt. Carla A. Miller

TAPS

1st Sgt. Bob Hall

John D. Van Groningen

Air Guard refueling wing earns 2005 Tuskegee Airman award

■Alfonza W. Davis Chapter presents Lt. Col. Charles Lane Aviator Award to 155th Air Refueling Wing for unit's work during Global War on Terror

By Chief Master Sgt. Vicky Cerino
Staff Writer

The Alfonza W. Davis Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., recently presented its Lt. Col. Charles Lane Aviator Award to the 155th Air Refueling Wing, Nebraska Air National Guard in Lincoln. The award is bestowed to a Nebraska National Guard, Reserve or active duty unit that demonstrates outstanding service in support of ongoing military campaigns.

The award, presented by Bobby McGlown, president of the Alfonza W. Davis Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., is named for Lane, who flew combat missions escorting bombers during World War II.

The award narrative credits the 155th Air Refueling Wing for excellence in support of ongoing combat campaigns around the world and in direct support

of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in response to the terrorist threat to the United States and the world.

The unit was cited for flying 121 combat missions, a total of 362.4 hours, and delivering 8,591,700 pounds of fuel to aircraft in support of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Lieutenant Colonel Lane was one of the original Tuskegee Airmen and current Nebraska resident that flew bomber escort missions over Germany during World War II," McGlown said.

"We felt it would be appropriate to honor those in Nebraska that have recently flown missions to support the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. We were honored to recognize the sacrifices and contributions of the 155th Air Refueling Wing with the Lt Col Charles Lane Top Flight Aviator Award."

Brig. Gen. Randy Scott, chief of staff, Joint Force Headquarters, Nebraska Air National Guard, accepted the award on behalf of Col. Steve Adams, current commander of the 155th Air Refueling Wing, and Brig. Gen. Robert Bailey, former commander of the 155th during part of the award period.

Scott said the Nebraska wing has traditionally stepped up to the plate during numerous national security events around the world and is considered one of the premier flying units in the Air Force. "The 155th Air Refueling Wing operates in the true spirit of the Tuskegee Airmen tradition," he said.

Guardsmen Sign Up For More



Photo courtesy of 189th Transportation Company

15 Soldiers reenlist while serving in Iraq

Capt. Darrin Huss, commander of the Nebraska Army National Guard's 189th Transportation Company from Norfolk and Wayne, administers the oath of reenlistment to 15 Soldiers assigned to his company, which is currently stationed in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Taking the oath on Dec. 15 were: Spc. Dustin Humphrey, Sgt. Eric Schnell, Sgt. Brian Fernau, Sgt. 1st Class Mark Talbert, Staff Sgt. Chad Pokorney, Sgt. Jody Campbell, Sgt. Chadwick Marksmeier, Staff Sgt. Brendon Dorcey, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Hagemann, Sgt. Michael Petersen, and Sgt. Brian Campbell. The 189th Transportation Company is currently stationed at Camp Adder near Tallil, Iraq, where it is responsible for a variety of missions including providing transportation and gun truck support for the movement of containerized and non-containerized cargo and personnel.

Long-time U.S. Property and Fiscal Officer retires

■ Air Guard officer selected to become new U.S.P&FO for Nebraska

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Brig. Gen. (Neb.) Stephen R. Robinson, Lincoln, retired from his position as the U.S. Property and Fiscal Officer (USP&FO) for the Nebraska National Guard, Jan. 31, after serving in the position since 1989.

Robinson was replaced by Lt. Col. David D. Zwart, Lincoln, who was nominated to the position by Gov. David Heinemann and then confirmed by Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, director of the National Guard Bureau.

Prior to coming to work for the National Guard in Lincoln, Zwart was a partner with the law firm of Baylor, Evnen, Curtiss, Gritmit & Witt, LLP.

As the new USP&FO, Zwart is now responsible to receive, account for and safeguard all federal funds and property provided to the State of Nebraska for the training and administration of the Nebraska Army and Air National Guard.

Robinson was born in Fairbury, Neb., in 1946 to Mr. and Mrs. J.H. Robinson.

After graduating from Fairbury High School in 1964 he attended Fairbury Junior College where he received an associate degree in Business Administration in 1966 and later graduated from Columbia College in Columbia, Mo., in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration.

His military career began in 1966 when he joined the Nebraska Army National Guard in Fairbury. In 1968 he was commissioned as a second lieutenant after graduating as honor graduate from the Nebraska National Guard Military Academy at Camp Ashland, Neb.

During the course of Robinson's 40-year military career, he served in a variety of leadership positions including anti-tank and infantry platoon leader, a tactical officer, detachment commander, personnel officer, and plans and operations officer.

On Aug. 1, 1987, Robinson was nominated by the Governor of Nebraska to receive a Presidential appointment as the director of the Nebraska Selective Service System.

In June 1989 he was nominated by then-Gov. Kay Orr to serve as the USP&FO to fill the vacancy created by the death of Col. Donald J. Hatten.



Robinson

Robinson graduated from a variety of military schools including the U.S. Army Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where he graduated on the Commandant's List.

Prior to his retirement, Robinson was promoted to the Nebraska Army National Guard rank of brigadier general. He also received the federal Legion of Merit Medal as well as state medals for distinguished service from the Montana and New Hampshire National Guards.

Robinson and his wife Elaine live in Lincoln. They have two children. Son Aaron and wife Dawn Robinson live in Lincoln with their son Ashton, while daughter, Ashley, is currently engaged to Brendan McDaniel.

Zwart, 47, was born on Feb. 23, 1958, in Sioux Falls, S.D., to Robert and Mary Zwart. A 1976 graduate of Lennox High School in Lennox, S.D., he attended the University of South Dakota at Vermillion, S.D., where he graduated in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in Psychology.

He later graduated from the University of Nebraska College of Law in 1991 with a juris doctor with distinction in Law.

Zwart's military career began in

January 1976 when he enlisted into the South Dakota Air National Guard as an administrative assistant with the 114th Fighter Wing based in Sioux Falls. He transferred to the Nebraska Air National Guard as a fuels specialist with the 155th Reconnaissance Maintenance Squadron in Lincoln in 1980. He left the Nebraska National Guard in 1982, but reenlisted in the Guard in 1986, resuming his duties as a fuels specialist.

Zwart received his commission as a second lieutenant in April 1988 after graduating from the Academy of Military Science at McGhee Tyson Air National Guard Base, Tenn. He then went onto serve in a variety of leadership assignments including transportation officer, education officer, health services administrator and deputy commander of the 155th Medical Group in Lincoln. Zwart left his full-time civilian law practice in June 2004 when he was selected to be the Nebraska National Guard deputy human resources officer.

Prior to assuming his current position as the USP&FO, Zwart served as the assistant USP&FO.

Zwart is a graduate of the Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College and the Air War College. He and his wife, Cheryl, have two daughters, Erin and Dana. The Zwarts live in Lincoln.



Zwart



Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Philip Perrone

Nebraska troops meet vice president

Several 67th Area Support Group Soldiers from Nebraska had a chance to meet Vice President Dick Cheney during the vice president's trip to Iraq and Afghanistan. Pictured with the vice president are: (Left, standing) Spc. Mujahid Kuwa, a native from Sudan who received his citizenship in Kansas City while the unit was at Fort Riley, Kan., and Sgt. John McNally at native of Nebraska, and (kneeling in the front row) Spc. Kasey McCoy, a Lincoln High Graduate.



Photo by Capt. Mike Chilstrom

Air Guardsmen volunteer to help out Hondurans

Chain Gang: Staff Sgt. Danielle Nuss (in truck) from the Nebraska Air National Guard passes a few boxes to Senior Airman Adam Snyder from the Ohio ANG, who, in turn, passes them to Tech. Sgt. Greg Sharp of the Nebraska ANG. The Airmen volunteered their time to help International Health Services unload supplies for upcoming medical missions throughout Honduras. The Guardsmen deployed to La Ceiba, Honduras as part of "New Horizons 2006-Honduras," a joint training exercise between the U.S. military and the Honduran government that will ultimately provide a maternity clinic, four schools and humanitarian medical care at 14 locations in and around the coastal city of La Ceiba.



Photo by David Nore

Aviation Pioneers

A pair of Aviation pioneers had a chance to meet and talk, Feb. 15, when retired Lt. Col. Paul Adams and Lt. Gen. Daniel James III posed for a photo in the Adjutant General's headquarters building in Lincoln.

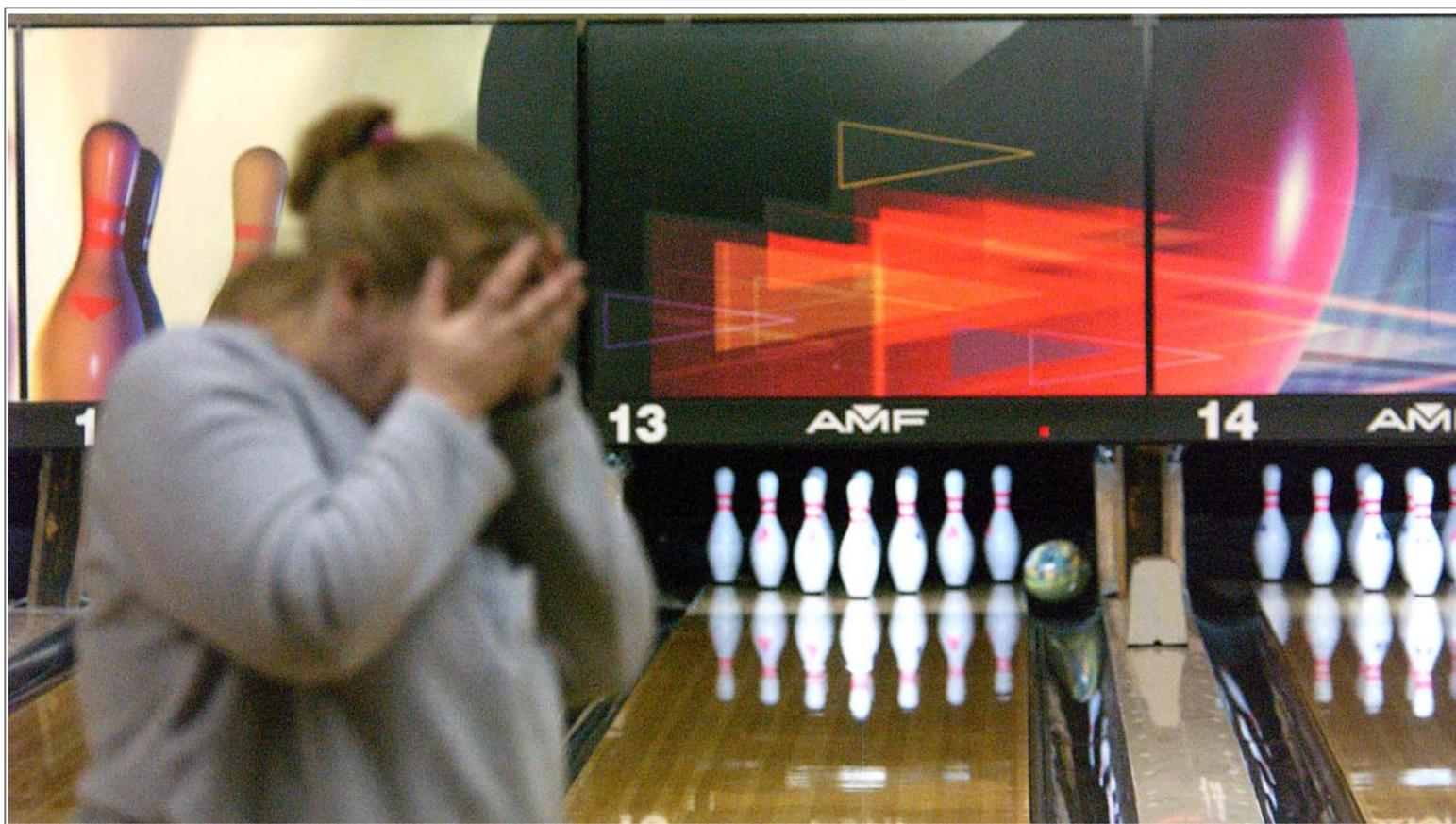
Adams served as a Tuskegee pilot during World War II. After the war, Adams served at a variety of locations worldwide and finally, as deputy base commander at Lincoln, Nebraska. He retired from the Air Force in 1963 after 20 years of service. Adams then joined the staff at Lincoln High School as an Industrial Arts teacher, one of the first three African-American teachers in the Lincoln school system. He continued to teach until 1982.

James is the current director of the Air National Guard and is responsible for formulating, developing and coordinating all policies, plans and programs that affect more than 104,000 Air National Guard members throughout the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands. James was in Lincoln to speak at the annual Nebraska Military Department African American Heritage Month Luncheon. His speech will be featured in the April edition of the *Prairie Soldier*.

Strike! Sara Wells' NASCAR ball slices through a set of pins enroute to a strike.



Helping Out: Michelle Bade plays with Emmaleigh Engleman while her mother, Amber Engleman, bowls.



Photos by Capt. Kevin Hynes

I Can't Watch: Renee Ryan covers her eyes as her bowling bowl descends into the gutter during a January bowling night in Lincoln. Ryan, who works full-time for the Nebraska Army National Guard, is among 52 women — most of them members of the Nebraska Army and Air National Guard — who participate in the weekly Pinbusters Bowling League in Lincoln.

PINBUSTERS

By Capt. Kevin Hynes
Editor

For the women involved, it's a place to catch up on family news, to share personal stories and even talk a little shop.

It's called the Pinbusters Bowling League and for the women involved, there's often no other place they'd rather be.

"You look forward to Wednesday night all through the week," said Master Sgt. Teresa Deschuiteneer, who works full-time for the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Security Forces Squadron in Lincoln. "You get to see people from the Army and Air National Guard who you might never get to any other way."

According to Deschuiteneer, who has bowling in the league for three years, the weekly bowling league serves to fill an important social need for the women involved.

"It's just a group of people who have the same interests, who talk the same language," she said. "We've got a lot of people who come in who don't know anyone else besides the people on their team. Before long they're friends with everyone in the league."

The National Guard Women's Bowling League actually started more than 20 years ago as an Air Guard league. It soon grew into one encompassing teams from both the Army and Air Guard, said Master Sgt. Deb Tankesley, a human resources specialist who works full-time at the National Guard headquarters in Lincoln.

"When I first joined, it was an Air Guard league," said Tankesley, who estimates that she's been involved in the league more than 23 years. "People have changed. Even the bowling alleys have changed...but the idea behind the league hasn't."

"We don't go to bowl...we go to socialize," said Tankesley. "We just happen to

■ Bowling league gives Guard women chance to have fun together during after duty hours

be socializing in a bowling alley. At least, that's what we tell each other."

Tankesley said that when she first started, teams were typically formed from an individual office or building staffs. Now, many of those original bowlers Tankesley first started with have retired or left the Guard. Others, however, have taken their place and teams have become mixed.

According to Cpl. Tonya Wagner, league treasurer, a person doesn't have to be a member of the Guard to bowl — but the vast majority are or at least have ties to the National Guard.

"We don't make being in the Guard a mandatory part of the league," said Wagner. "But it really is Guard league. We've got bowlers from probably every single Guard building in the Lincoln area."

A total of 52 women are currently participating in this year's league in nine three-person teams. Out of these, most are full-time Guardsmen, however a number of recent retirees and wives or



Body English: Julianne Kenkel uses her body to attempt to coax her ball in an unsuccessful bid to pick up a four-pin split.



Here's Looking At You: A rainbow (and then some) of bowling balls wait to be used during the weekly Pinbusters bowling league held at a Lincoln bowling alley.

relatives of Guardsmen participate.

The season began in August and will run until the end of March.

Deschuiteneer and Tankesley said that one of the things that make the Pinbuster's League different from others is the sheer amount of bowlers involved.

"Typically, a three-person team doesn't need much more than one alternate," said Deschuiteneer. "Our teams typically have three or more. The main reason behind that is our bowlers are typically called away for military schools or deployments or whatever for weeks at a time."

"One of the nice things about this league is that nobody bats an eye when you come in and say, 'I'm going to miss the next three weeks because I'm going to be gone,'" said Deschuiteneer. "In a civilian league, that would be a pretty big deal, but not here. Here, you just call up the alternates and they fall right in."

"With all of us being in the Guard or having a Guard tie, you understand

when those types of things come up," said Tankesley. "There are just so many extra things that you have to do when you're in the Guard because of all the schools and extra work schedules."

"There are times when you'll have a completely different set of bowlers from week to week because of all the deployments going on and the schools that are required," she added. "It's just accepted."

Tankesley said that even though the league is centered around bowling, the thing that she enjoys the most is talking with the other bowlers.

"We all have something in common. We spend a lot of time talking about kids, families, those kinds of things," she said. "We even slip a little work talk in once in a while, but mostly, we're gabbing about each other's kids."

"In fact, sometimes we get so caught up in gabbing that people have to remind you that it's your turn to bowl," Tankesley added.

Warrant Officer Julianne Kenkel said one of the best part of the league is talking with people outside of the normal working environment.

"It's just a lot of fun," said Kenkel, one of the alternate bowlers this year. "We all know each other from work, but this gives a chance to get to know each other in a different setting...a more normal setting."

Kenkel said that many of the women often bring their kids to bowling night and take turns bouncing each other's children on their knees when it's mom's time to bowl. Often, husbands and boyfriends also come out to watch, cheer and exchange catcalls with the bowlers. It's always in fun, Kenkel said.

"I don't want to call this a family because that seems like kind of a tired expression...but we really are a family," she said.

"We're around each other so much, both at work and at places like this, that we really are more like one big family than simply co-workers."