

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS • ENSURING RIGHTS, RECOGNITION AND REMEMBRANCE

# VFW

**National Guard and Reserves  
at**

# WAR

Special reprint of articles from *VFW* magazine

# contents

## SPECIAL ISSUE

By the summer of 2006, 150,000 soldiers of the Army National Guard had served in Iraq. Thousands more reservists of all the services have served there and in Afghanistan. This is a tribute to their sacrifices.

- 3** Citizen-Soldiers Count on VFW • *By Commander-in-Chief Gary Kurpius*
- 4** Forget the Weekend, They Are Full-Fledged ... Warriors • *By Susan Katz Keating*
- 8** Guardsmen in Iraq Accomplishing Their Mission • *By Tim Dyhouse*
- 12** 'Outside the Wire': Citizen-Soldiers in Combat in Iraq  
• *By Kara Petrovic*
- 22** Saving Lives, One Roadside Bomb at a Time • *By Tim Dyhouse*
- 27** Afghanistan: The Other Theater • *By Richard K. Kolb*
- 28** Reservists Show Battlefield Bravery • *By Richard K. Kolb*
- 32** Rousing Welcome Home for Mississippi Guard  
• *By Janie Blankenship*
- 34** Mississippi Post Raises \$24,000 for Guard  
Vet Amputee • *By Janie Blankenship*
- 35** Reservists in Action (Combat Chronology)  
• *By Richard K. Kolb*
- 36** VA Benefits Guard & Reserves  
• *By Richard K. Kolb*
- 38** Army National Guard Brigade Combat Teams  
Proudly Served in Iraq • *By Joe Moran*
- 39** Honoring the Sacrifices: Arkansas' National Guard  
Memorial • *Photo and caption by Sgt. Chris A. Durney*
- 40** Wisconsin and Mississippi Guard Vets Forming New  
VFW Posts • *By Tim Dyhouse*

### Special Features

Saga of Iraq Reservist Matt Maupin .....	<b>7</b>
GIs Bring Food, Water and Medical Aid to Remote Iraqi Villages .....	<b>11</b>
National Guard and Reserve Casualties .....	<b>19</b>
National Guard Fatalities in Iraq—10 Highest by Hostile Fire .....	<b>19</b>
Firebase Tomahawk: The National Guard's Deadliest Day in Vietnam ..	<b>21</b>
Three Types of Detonations .....	<b>25</b>
Looking at Life Differently .....	<b>25</b>
Featured on Film .....	<b>26</b>

**ON THE COVER:** *Spc. Casey M. Cooper, 617th MP Co., Kentucky National Guard, shortly after his unit foiled an ambush on March 20, 2005. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Marshall P. Ware*



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### VFW: The Organization

VFW's National Headquarters is located in Kansas City, Mo. All administrative business is conducted from there. In addition, an office in Washington, D.C., is responsible for monitoring legislative and related national issues of importance to veterans.

More than 8,500 Posts comprise 54 Departments in the 50 states, District of Columbia, Latin America, the Pacific Areas and Europe. Posts form the local chapters. Membership in 2006 stood at 1.7 million.

Working in concert with VFW is its Ladies Auxiliary, a national volunteer service association founded in 1914. It is the backbone of many local VFW volunteer efforts.

The benefits of joining are both tangible and intangible. As a member, you will receive VFW magazine monthly and may also obtain the bimonthly newsletter *Checkpoint*. Also, 20 benefits ranging from discounted car rental fees to a credit union to a special Member Honor Roll are available.

Equally important is the sense of camaraderie and pride you will share with veterans of prior wars.

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**COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF**  
Gary Kurpius

## Citizen-Soldiers Count on VFW

*Troops of the National Guard and Reserves rely on us to support them in the field and back them and their families after returning home.*

**T**o many of us who served in Vietnam, combat and the National Guard were rarely synonymous. For sure, Guard units served there, especially in 1968. But it was not until 1990-91 that large-scale mobilizations began (37,484 Army Guardsmen went to the Persian Gulf).

Since then, Guardsmen and reservists have been an integral part of America's overseas forces, helping keep the peace from the Balkans to the Middle East. What has changed today, however, is the actual combat role of Guard and Reserve units. Infantrymen from Washington to Florida have directly engaged the enemy on the streets of Iraq.

They are, in fact, upholding a tradition dating back to the nation's colonial origins. More recently, two entire National Guard divisions (40th and 45th) fought in Korea during the 1950-53 war. And many individual Special Forces members from the Guard have served in Afghanistan. Today, Guardsmen and reservists are in the thick of things in Iraq. Their killed in action so far have totaled 456.

So what does all this mean for VFW? First, local VFW Posts have a great opportunity to connect with hometown units. Unlike when the draft was in effect or even the all-volunteer army with individuals from all over, Guard outfits have strong community roots. Tapping into such ties is an ideal means to establish long-lasting relationships.

When these units are sent overseas, make sure to give them a sendoff they will remember. *Operation Uplink* phone cards have proven invaluable in this regard. While they are in the war zone, send care packages and assist their families. And when they come home, help stage homecoming events. Examples of such activities are covered in the article beginning on page 32.

Second, these investments in troop morale are not only the right thing to do, but will pay dividends in the future. Cementing a bond early on allows a Post to approach returning Guard vets about membership. Having seen firsthand what VFW stands for, they will certainly be more likely to enthusiastically embrace the organization. Thus a new generation of war veterans will maintain VFW traditions in the future.

Not in decades has VFW had such an opportunity to make headway among potential new members. Please do not let the advantages we have today slip away. There is much to be done both locally and nationally.

Besides the veterans who return whole, there is another category of ex-warriors from both Guard and Reserve ranks that will require special attention: the 4,766 wounded from the war zones, as well as those suffering from PTSD.

A significant number will have been wounded in body and mind for years to come. More than a few VFW members will be able to personally identify with their suffering. Be ready to share your experiences and how you coped with physical and mental pain. No one is better qualified than a fellow combat veteran when it comes to offering advice on surviving war's aftermath.

By summer 2006, 150,000 Army National Guard soldiers had served in Iraq. Some 69,000 Army and Air Guardsmen were overseas then. These citizen-soldiers will play a vital role in VFW's future.

# Forget the weekend, they are full-fledged...

PHOTO COURTESY GREG WALKER



**In this modern age of warfare, members of the National Guard and Reserves are no longer “weekend warriors,” they have become front-line combatants on the ground in Iraq.**

**by Susan Katz Keating**

**A**merican soldiers assigned to the Maghrib neighborhood of Baghdad in 2003 found themselves in a shadowy, treacherous territory. Home to both squalid slums and lavish mansions, the Maghrib concealed a diehard cadre of Saddam Hussein loyalists. Any day in Maghrib could bring sudden violence, pitting GIs against a lethal enemy.

It's not so unusual that U.S. personnel would fight an enemy. In this case, however, the Ameri-

cans engaged in brutal combat were not full-time active-duty troops; rather, they were activated members of the Florida National Guard.

In March 2003, 3,729 Guardsmen from the 53rd (Fla.), 76th (Ind.) and 41st (Ore.) brigade combat teams (BCT) fought in the initial invasion of Iraq.

It is a significant phenomenon. In the manpower-intensive *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Reserve and National Guard troops have been heavily

mobilized. By the end of 2003, nearly 30,000 were serving in Iraq, many from the 30th (N.C.), 39th (Ark.) and 81st (Wash.) BCTs. For the first time since the Korean War, National Guard troops—otherwise known as “citizen-soldiers” who spend the bulk of their lives pursuing civilian careers—are shouldering a hefty burden in combat.

“The National Guard has been in combat since Day 1, and is still in the thick of the fighting,” said Lt. Gen Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau that oversees all Guard operations. “These soldiers and airmen are performing magnificently.”

They are performing like the professionals they are, and also improvising and adapting to new versions of their traditional roles.

“This is a different type of war,” said retired Maj. Gen. Richard Alexander, president of the National Guard Association of the United States. “People who were mobilized for support missions are now in combat missions. There is no forward. There is no rear. The war is all around you.” As such, Alexander said, Guard troops have become combat troops. “Their role has merged with that of their active-duty brethren.”

In the war’s first phase, 29,000 Army National Guard soldiers from 708 units served in Iraq and Kuwait. This included seven infantry battalions. Their members received 476 Combat Infantryman Badges and 31 Combat Medical Badges.

In early 2004, 22%, or 28,000 of the U.S. forces in

Iraq, were Guard or Reserve members. By April of 2004, the reserve contribution was 39,000, equaling 37% of the total U.S. strength. Among them were 6,000 Marine reservists, and 15,000 soldiers comprising three separate infantry brigades: 30th (North Carolina), 39th (Arkansas) and 81st (Washington and California). At least two of the latter were slated for active combat duty.

### Maghrib to the ‘Wild West’

In Maghrib, that role involved intense urban combat for the soldiers of the 124th Infantry Regiment of the Florida National Guard. Targeted by loyalists of the old regime, the 124th was hit with a repertoire of guerrilla-style attacks.

Shortly after arriving in Baghdad in 2003, for example, two members were shot by a lone assailant at point-blank range and killed. The battalion’s headquarters was hit with rocket-propelled grenades and rifle fire.

Rather than hunker down against further assault, though, the 124th hit the streets, patrolling via “LPC,” shorthand for “leather personnel carrier”: the old-fashioned combat boot.

Patrols took the Floridians into broad boulevards and dark alleys alike. Grunts uncovered deadly homemade explosives placed among refuse piles. The devices are detonated by timers, or via radio or cell phone signals—and have maimed and killed soldiers.



DOD PHOTO

**Above:** Members of the 115th MP Company of the Rhode Island National Guard prepare to search an Iraqi home believed to be a bomb-making and weapon-storage site on July 31, 2003.

**Opposite page:** Operators from Operational Detachment ALPHA (ODA) 912, A Co., 1st Bn., 19th Special Forces Group of the Washington National Guard, pose outside Saddam’s south palace near Baghdad International Airport on April 27, 2003.

**Right:** Guardsmen of the 124th Infantry Regiment of the Florida National Guard patrol the streets of downtown Baghdad.



PHOTO BY SPC. STEVEN HANDWORK, FLORIDA NATIONAL GUARD PAO

A far distance from urban Maghrib, other Guardsmen served in a combat tour in Fallujah, nicknamed the “Wild West” of the Middle East. In this remote outpost, MPs from the 115th Military Police Company of the Rhode Island National Guard spent a good portion of their time searching cars for armed opponents. The combat assignments were not made arbitrarily.

“The active-duty military needs the Guard and the Reserves,” said John Goheen, spokesman for the National Guard Association. “It cannot conduct wartime operations without them.”

In addition to manpower, the Guard provides the active military an added benefit. Paul McHale, assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense, termed it an exceptional “pool of talent” and a wealth of experience drawn from civilian careers.

That wealth has been a particular boon to the Special Operations Command. Shortly after the atrocities of Sept. 11, 2001, active-duty Green Berets began working alongside and learning from National Guard and Reserve Special Forces troops, many of whom are seasoned veterans.

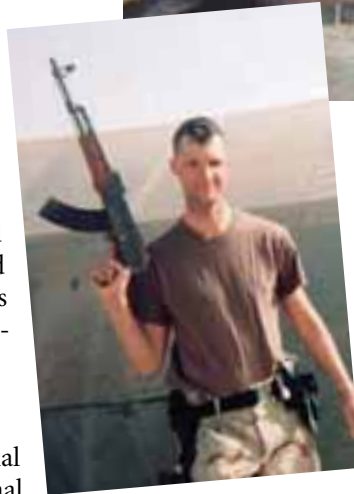
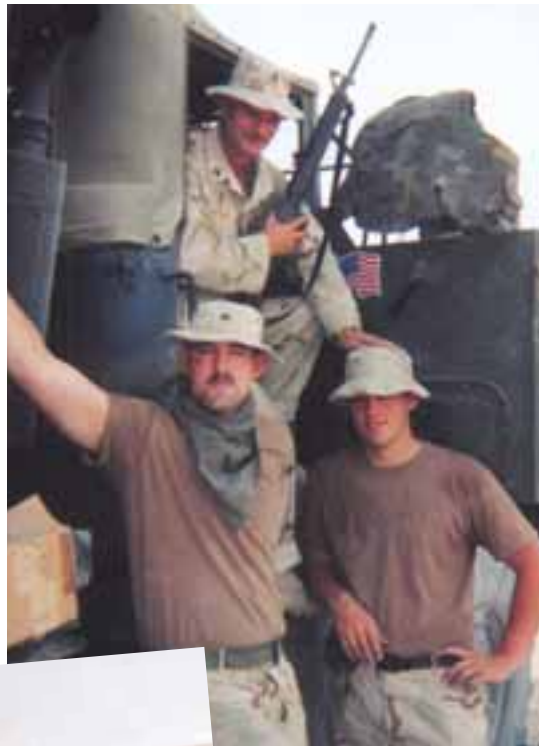
### 19th SFG in Action

Indeed, 20% of Army Special Forces come from the National Guard. Among them is A Co., 1st Bn., 19th Special Forces Group based in Buckley, Wash. Maj. Andrew Franz led a 23-man liaison element from that unit in Iraq in March 2003.

Ordered to recon ahead of the 3rd Infantry Division to link up with Special Forces teams already operating there secretly, the 19th successfully completed its mission. This assignment took members all the way to the Karbala Gap, a strategic pass southwest of Baghdad.

“Operating out ahead of everyone else was pretty scary,” Franz related to freelance writer Bill Matthews for *National Guard* magazine. “But the linkup went smoothly.” Observed Franz, “[Iraq provided] probably some of the hardest conditions I’ve ever been in.”

Duties in Iraq ran the gamut from long-range recon missions to personnel security details.



VFW members Richard Hoffman (above, sitting in the cab) and Greg Seidlitz (left) are among the many from the organization's ranks who served overseas in Reserve and Guard units. They hail from New York and Wisconsin, respectively. A Sgt. Lyness and Pfc. Mark Moore are with Hoffman at Camp Doha in Kuwait.

Sean Houlihan, who had seen combat in Panama in 1989, went into Iraq as an engineer with the 19th Special Forces Group. His prior experience helped him navigate much of what he encountered. But there were some things he was not prepared for.

“I had to deal with a minivan full of Iraqis who were looking for members of their family that Saddam took and put in a prison for no reason,” Houlihan said. “They begged me daily to take them to the prison so they could find their family.” Houlihan obliged, driving the desperate Iraqis from site to site. It was a heart-wrenching and ultimately fruitless search, he said. “After about a week, they gave up.”

Deployed for nine months, including time in Kuwait, A Company's 83 men

returned to Ft. Lewis, Wash., in late May 2003. Taking part in the battles at Baghdad, Basra, the Karbala Gap, Kut, Najaf and Nasiriyah, they came home without suffering a single casualty.

### Casualty Count Mounting

But while National Guard troops are fighting in significant numbers and performing heroically, they also are suffering casualties—and losing their lives. A number of units across the nation have experienced milestone losses.

In September 2003, the Kentucky Army National Guard reported its first combat death since the Vietnam War. That same month, two soldiers from the 115th MP Company (R.I.) became that state's first Guard hostile fatalities since World War II.

In that incident, a routine mission escorting a convoy turned to tragedy when an MP vehicle took a direct hit from an improvised explosive device. Staff Sgt. Joseph Camara, a 21-year Guard veteran and father of three, was killed, as was newlywed Sgt. Charles Caldwell. A third MP was killed later.

In November 2003, a 21-year-old electric company worker with the 124th Infantry Regiment became the Florida Guard's third combat death in Iraq.

National attention focused on another tragic incident that November, when a CH-47 Chinook helicopter was shot down in Iraq. Sixteen military personnel aboard the National Guard-operated helicopter were killed. Among them were three members of Illinois's 106th Aviation Battalion.

All told—with five deaths each—Iowa, Indiana and Pennsylvania had lost the largest number of Guardsmen and Reservists in Iraq by the end of 2003.

During the first offensive phase of the war, National Guard and Reserve units sustained 12 deaths (10 in accidents). But after May 1, 2003, and as of Dec. 19,

69 citizen-soldiers had been killed in Iraq, most as a result of hostile action. Their deaths climbed from less than 9% of the total to 21% of Americans lost.

### 'Sunshine Employers'

Aside from the dangers of combat, Guardsmen have faced additional difficulties at home.

"The military provides plenty of re-entry help: counseling, medical/dental assistance and financial aid services," Houlihan affirms. But problems have surfaced with "sunshine employers" unhappy with the long deployments. Such employers do only the bare minimum that is required for holding a Guard member's job, he said.

Similar problems have come to light elsewhere in a particularly poignant manner. A police officer, 24-year-old Darrin Potter of Louisville, Ky., lost his civilian job while serving with a Kentucky MP squad. He filed suit to recoup the job, but was killed in Iraq before the matter was resolved.

Since 2001, some 560,000 reservists have been called up—460,000 returned to the civilian work force. Of these,

10,000 requested assistance in resolving disputes with employers. New rules (issued in January 2006) clarify the *Uniformed Services Employment & Reemployment Rights Act of 1994*. The National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve can help.

All National Guard issues—be they tinged with heroism or tragedy—will remain of great interest to military planners. In September 2003, the Pentagon's McHale hinted to a conference audience what lay ahead for the Guard.

"I believe that the National Guard will function as our country's strategic reserve, prepared to take the fight to the enemy or engage in stability operations," he said. "National Guardsmen ... will continue to fight overseas as part of our total force."

National Guard Bureau Chief Blum said his people are prepared to meet that need. "The National Guard will continue to be ready, reliable and accessible across the full spectrum of missions from support to civil authorities, through homeland security and defense to close-quarters combat in the streets of Iraq," he said.

For those who have been on the ground in Iraq, success is in sight.

Greg Seidlitz, a member of VFW Post 1318 in Madison, Wis., served with the 447th MP Company (Ohio) in Iraq. "We pounded pickets for a new POW compound and interrogated prisoners," he wrote home, assuring friends and family of progress there. "America is making headway in our war against terror. And I am very proud to have been a small part of it."

Army Reserve Staff Sgt. Richard Hoffman, the first Iraq vet to join VFW Post 5199 in Oceanside, N.Y., served with the 389th Engineer Company in-country. He had personal reasons for wanting to go to Iraq. "I felt like I had to do something about it [the destruction of the World Trade Center, which he witnessed]. I was glad that 1½ years later, I was in Iraq fighting terrorism."

The National Guard Association agrees. As Alexander said, "The National Guard is heavily involved. Though lives are being lost, victories are being won." ★

**SUSAN KATZ KEATING** is a freelance writer who specializes in military affairs.

## Saga of Iraq Reservist Matt Maupin

**Only one GI is unaccounted for** in the Iraq War. Because of the peculiar military situation in Iraq, Army Staff Sgt. Keith "Matt" Maupin is not officially regarded as missing in action nor as a prisoner of war. But he is listed as missing and captured.

In April 2005, an Army board of inquiry reviewed his case and declared him still in the captured status. At that time, an Army spokesman said, "They continue to search for him, and he is not forgotten."

Maupin has been unaccounted for since April 9, 2004, when his fuel truck was ambushed in a Baghdad suburb. A member of the Army Reserve's 724th Transportation Company based in Bartonville, Ill., Maupin hails from Batavia, Ohio.

Terrorists later released videotape purportedly showing his execution. But because of its poor quality and the fact

that Maupin's body was never recovered, his status remains in limbo. However, he could have been reclassified as "deceased, body not recovered" as was commonly done during the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, his parents maintain a Yellow Ribbon Support Center in Batavia. Besides sending care packages to GIs in Iraq, the storefront serves as a nerve center for keeping the memory of Maupin's capture alive.

Maupin's plight will not be forgotten. As Darrel Whitcomb, retired Air Force colonel and a combat search-and-rescue historian, pointed out: "No other nation in the world dedicates as much force structure, time, training and thought to rescue as does the United States. It's part of the way we fight, part of the way we are. We will never stop looking for him."

As of mid-2006, the search was still on.



PHOTO COURTESY 88TH REGIONAL READINESS COMMAND

Staff Sgt. Keith "Matt" Maupin, a member of the Army Reserve's 724th Transportation Company, was captured on April 9, 2004. His whereabouts remain a mystery. He was promoted on Aug. 8, 2006.

# Guardsmen in Iraq Accomplish Their Mission

*In August 2005, a VFW delegation visited National Guard units from Texas (36th Division), Tennessee (278th Brigade Combat Team) and Idaho (116th Brigade Combat Team).*

**VFW** representatives who toured Iraq and Kuwait in August obtained a literal bird's-eye view of the war zone. In the relative safety of Black Hawk helicopters, the group flew from its base at Camp Victory in Baghdad to: Camp Fallujah East in Fallujah; Forward Operating Base Warrior in Kirkuk; the Iraqi army basic training academy at Taji; and Camp Caldwell in Kirkush, some 15 miles west of Iran in central Iraq. They also visited Ali al Salem Air Base and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, as well as Camp Sather, Phoenix Base and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

Accompanying past VFW Commander-in-Chief John Furgess were Ken Burton, the Texas VFW state advocate general and Post 9182 member in Katy, Texas; Jerry Patterson, of VFW Post 4395 in Austin, Texas, and commissioner of the Texas General Land Office; and Ross Worley, a Vietnam vet and Kansas City-based businessman.

"This was a unique opportunity to meet with the troops and personally thank them for their service," Furgess said. "They are VFW's future. We wanted to let them know how we can help them and explain the benefits of belonging to our great organization."

The visit was the first by any U.S. veterans organization to Iraq, according to Lt. Mark White of A Co., 111th Eng. Bn., 36th



*Story and photos by*  
TIM DYHOUSE

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Former VFW Commander-in-Chief John Furgess thanks soldiers for their service and explains the benefits of VFW membership at Forward Operating Base Warrior near Kirkuk. Furgess learned that VFW's *Operation Uplink* phone cards are greatly appreciated by troops when traveling from Iraq to Kuwait, Germany or back to the States.



**Above:** Spc. John Westbrook, a medic with A Co., 111th Eng. Bn., 36th Inf. Div., shows another soldier the contents of his medical kit at Forward Operating Base Warrior. Westbrook, a National Guardsman who works as a firefighter in Houston, says he has gained a lot of clinical experience, such as what medications to use for certain conditions, during his tour in Iraq.



**Left:** Members of the Arizona National Guard's C Co., 1st Bn., 189th Aviation Regt., pose with their VFW flag before flying VFW representatives to Baghdad's "Green Zone." Black Hawk helicopters were the VFW contingent's main mode of transportation during the five-day visit to five military installations in Iraq.

Inf. Div., a Texas National Guard unit in charge of guarding the Joint Visitors Bureau at Camp Victory, the sprawling home to some 30,000 U.S. troops near Baghdad International Airport.

"I see all distinguished visitors to Camp Victory, and VFW is the first veterans group to be here," he said. White, along with Spc. John Westbrook and Spc. Ryan Rowley, were the VFW delegation's escorts and main security detail.

While it might sound like easy duty, guarding VIPs in a place like Baghdad can be a dangerous job, especially when "running the gauntlet," also known as

driving to the airport.

"I've had to pull my sidearm a few times to warn drivers who have gotten too close to our vehicles when we've been traveling on the airport road," White said. "A pistol seems to scare the Iraqis worse than a rifle. It might be because they remember Saddam's [Hussein] henchmen with sidearms."

### **Fallujah:**

#### **'A Symbol to the Insurgents'**

Though the VFW group was well-protected, it did visit some front-line areas, such as Camp Fallujah East, headquar-



PHOTO COURTESY 278TH REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

Soldiers from the 278th Regimental Combat Team at Camp Caldwell near Kirkush constructed a memorial to three members of the 3rd Squadron who were killed Aug. 14 when enemy forces attacked their Humvee with rocket-propelled grenades and small-arms fire. It was the 278th's worst loss of life in a single incident during its deployment to Iraq.

ters for the II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), northwest of Baghdad. The commander, Marine Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson, said the city of Fallujah, site of a month-long battle last November to rid the city of Saddam loyalists, is now "a symbol to the insurgents of getting beat. It'll never get back to the way it was [as a

and Fort Bragg [in North Carolina]."

Unfortunately, the visit was cut short due to news of 14 Marine reservists from Ohio killed earlier that morning (Aug. 3) near Haditha, when their amphibious vehicle struck three anti-tank mines placed atop each other by insurgents.

"It is literally the badlands out there," said Marine Lt. Col. John Skinner, the protocol officer. "The Marines in that area are shutting down the rat lines of the insurgents' smuggling activity."

To help Marines cope with battle, the Corps offers the Warrior Transition Program, a one-hour session Marines attend with their peers before leaving for home.

"Some of these men have seen terrible things," said Navy Capt. Lee Milliner, the II MEF's chaplain at Camp Fallujah East. "They don't want to tell these things to their wives and kids."

### **Camp Caldwell: Arresting 'Bad Guys'**

From Fallujah, the VFW group flew to Camp Caldwell near Kirkush, some 15 miles west of the Iranian border. It is the temporary home of the 278th Regimental Combat Team, a Tennessee National Guard armored cavalry regiment.

278th Commander Col. Dennis Adams said his unit's area of operations in east-central Iraq is one of the largest in the war zone, and his troops had conducted some 10,000 patrols covering between 15,000 and 16,000 miles.

They also had detained 304 insurgents and killed 17 to 20 "that we know of." Adams said their main job is to "cordon off, raid homes, kick in doors and arrest bad guys."

He added that his soldiers' civilian skills and initiative came in handy earlier in their deployment when they found themselves lacking the proper protection for their vehicles. They fortified them by welding on extra steel, or "hill-billy armor," found around their camp.

"With all the civilian experience, we were able to do it," he said. "We don't sit around and wait for it to be given to us. It was worth all the ass-chewings and letters I received."

Tragedy struck the 278th on Aug. 14 (11 days after VFW visited) when three of its soldiers were killed in the single worst loss of life of the unit's deployment. Assigned to the 3rd Squadron, the soldiers died when enemy forces attacked their Humvee with rocket-propelled grenades and small-arms fire in Tuz.

Two more soldiers from the same squadron died Aug. 22 in Samarra when an improvised explosive device detonated near their Humvee while they were conducting patrol operations. According to the Tennessee National Guard, nine soldiers from the 278th had died in Iraq as of that date.

### **FOB Warrior: 'Doing a Hell of a Job'**

Forward Operating Base (FOB) Warrior near the city of Kirkuk in an oil-rich region of northern Iraq also was on the itinerary. It is home to the 116th Brigade Combat Team, with the largest single contingent of soldiers from the Idaho National Guard. The camp receives an average of three to five mortar or rocket attacks a week, according to Sgt. Eric Uhercik.

"It started to quiet down about a month ago," said Uhercik, who as a civilian works in the jail at the Sacramento (Calif.) County Sheriff's Department. "Of the guys who harassed us, we called the most notorious the 'Rocket Man.' We never could catch him. He finally blew

**"It is literally the badlands out there."**

**—Marine Lt. Col. John Skinner**

safe haven for terrorists]."

Johnson says the camp takes indirect fire on an average of once a week. He noted that a typical Marine tour for staff officers is one year and seven months for troops at the battalion level and below.

"Six or seven months for these guys is plenty of time," Johnson said. "We've got guys who have been here three times in one enlistment."

Johnson stressed that VFW's *Operation Uplink* program, which supplies prepaid phone cards for troops, is appreciated because the Marines there are prohibited from using personal cell phones. But he also suggested VFW could help more with family support, especially for the wounded.

"Find areas where this is needed," the general said, "like around Camp LeJeune

# GIs Bring Food, Water and Medical Aid to Remote Iraqi Villages

*Here are some recent examples of how U.S. troops are helping Iraqi citizens.*

- Soldiers comprising a task force from the 116th Brigade Combat Team conducted a medical assistance visit on Aug. 1 at Husseinia, a remote village in western Kirkuk Province. Capt. Jeff Westfall said, "We were expecting maybe 30 patients, but we ended up with more than 100."

- The 116th also conducts *Operation Provide School Supplies* for 24 schools in the Kirkuk area. The project receives 200 to 250 boxes a week containing things like crayons, glue and books from U.S. groups. These include VFW Posts in Idaho where many of the 116th's soldiers are National Guardsmen. One soldier said that in return for providing school supplies, the 116th receives "a lot of information" regarding insurgent activity.

- Soldiers with the 3rd Bn., 15th Inf., 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Inf. Div., opened the first of 27 new compact water treatment units on July 19 in Sadr City on the northeast edge of

Baghdad. Each unit produces 15,000 liters of clean potable water a day, which will mean 405,000 liters per day once all the units are operational. Lt. Col. Gary Luck said, "After 35 years of neglect, it is good to see projects coming to fruition here."

- Soldiers from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and 256th Brigade Combat Team (Louisiana National Guard) delivered 1,200 frozen chickens to some 600 Iraqi families on July 12 in Abu Mannaser in western Abu Ghraib. Lt. Col. Jim Blackburn of the 1st Sqdn., 11th ACR, said operations such as these "discredit terrorists who are operating in that area and denying the people basic services."

- The Iraqi Schools Program, founded by Army Maj. Greg Softy in August 2003, had distributed 42,682 packages containing 1,013,274 pounds of school supplies, clothing and toys in the West Rashid area of Baghdad as of May 25, 2005. Col. Dennis Adams, commander of the 278th Regimental Combat Team based in east-central Iraq, said his troops had built some 40 schools in the area as of August 2005.

himself up."

The area is volatile. As of VFW's visit, eight soldiers from the 116th had died in Iraq since it deployed to FOB Warrior in December 2004. Despite Sgt. Uhercik's statement that most attacks occurred between 8:30 p.m. and 11:30 p.m., VFW's departure from the base was delayed due to reports of a rocket attack at 3:15 p.m. that day.

The 116th's Command Sgt. Maj. Brent Kelsey said enemy attacks shouldn't be the media's sole focus.

"I can tell when CNN has been through Kirkuk because all of the bad things that have happened are being reported on TV," said the father of four whose active-duty wife serves with him, along with 12 other married couples, at FOB Warrior. "I'd like everybody to know these kids are doing a hell of a job over here."

**"I'd like everybody to know these kids are doing a hell of a job over here."**

**—Command Sgt. Maj. Brent Kelsey  
116th Brigade Combat Team**

per *The Idaho Statesman*.

"This is the duality of our mission," he wrote in an Aug. 16 article about a mission to police-up a nearby neighborhood that had been the site of the most roadside bomb explosions in the

city. "We must be tactically proficient soldiers one moment, bounding quickly with weapons at the ready and scanning our sector for possible trouble, and the next minute immediately switch to smiling, waving, very accessible and happy ambassadors of goodwill. We load magazines full of 5.56mm ammunition in rucksacks next to teddy bears and lollipops."

## Thankful for VFW's Visit

VFW's representatives heard many soldiers throughout the region express dismay that stories detailing positive progress are not broadcast or published stateside. Besides helping Iraqi civilians (see sidebar), U.S. troops are training recruits for the country's national army.

At Phoenix Base in downtown Baghdad, the VFW contingent received a briefing from Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, who is in charge of the \$12 billion effort that has produced 108 Iraqi army battalions in the last year. He said the goal is to have 117 battalions of 720 men each: "We want to get more Iraqis in the fight with better equipment."

The VFW representatives also toured the Iraqi basic training academy at Taji. A U.S. officer there noted that privates who served in Saddam's army earned about \$4 a month; now they earn some \$350 a month.

Overall, the U.S. troops VFW members met with in Iraq and Kuwait were an extremely dedicated, professional group committed to their mission. They also were thankful for VFW's visit.

"Soldiers really appreciate groups coming over and showing gratitude for what we do and thanking us for our service," White said one morning at breakfast. "When I see young specialists like Rowley willing to put their lives on the line to protect people like your group, it makes me feel really proud." ☆

**Editor's Note:** When the 116th BCT arrived home in Idaho in November 2005, VFW Post 63 in Boise hosted welcome-home dinners. The Post also distributed \$70,000 worth of free phone cards to the Guardsmen while they were in Iraq.

# 'Outside the

# Wire'

## Citizen-Soldiers in Combat



Leathernecks of 2nd Squad, 1st Platoon, L Company, 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines (Reserve) take time out during their mission in Iraq. Lima Company suffered 23 KIA and 48 WIA during its tour in 2005. Nicknamed "The Vikings," they are: back row, Lance Cpl. Schreiber, Lance Cpl. Burke, Cpl. McCauley, Doc Arnold, and Cpl. Reynolds; front row are Lance Cpl. Shay, Lance Cpl. Gain, Sgt. Taylor, Cpl. Rizvi and Lance Cpl. Flynn.

This is a snapshot of service and sacrifice from simply a sampling of National Guard and Reserve units that fought in Iraq. It represents the finest traditions of America's armed forces.

### **"Lucky Lima": Hardest Hit**

The 3rd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division (Reserve) was destined for notoriety in Iraq. But not the type normally craved. And one company in particular would be singled out.

The 3rd Battalion consists of five companies (three rifle, one weapons and one headquarters and service). Based in Brook Park (a suburb of Cleveland), Ohio, the roughly 900 members hail from Ohio, West Virginia and New York.

In March 2005, about 150 Marines from Lima Company, based in Columbus, Ohio, deployed to Iraq as part of the 3rd Battalion. One of the battalion's primary duties was to block the "ratlines" from Syria—infiltration routes into Anbar province. Along with accompanying units, Lima's area of operations was the size of West Virginia.

After more than a month in Iraq, Lima operated without fatalities. But the unit's "luck" ran out in early May, when four Marines of the 1st Platoon were killed. Then on June 9, the 3rd Battalion lost three more men.

On Aug. 1, insurgents ambushed six Marine snipers attached to the battalion's Headquarters and Service Company.

The two sniper teams—of three men each operating on foot—were working in Haditha, a city in western Iraq along the Euphrates River. That city served as the guerrillas' main way station on the path to Baghdad.

Both teams were wiped out in the ambush. Ansar al Sunna, a terrorist group, claimed responsibility for the deaths.

A mere 48 hours later, on Aug. 3, tragedy struck Lima Company. Fourteen Marines and a civilian Iraqi interpreter died when their 25-ton personnel carrier hit three anti-tank mines stacked on top of each other and buried several feet under the road's asphalt.

The explosion threw the burning vehicle into the air, landing upside down and leaving the 14 Marines with no escape. Nine of the men were from the company's 1st Squad of the 3rd Platoon alone.

Lance Cpl. Travis Williams was the sole survivor from the 1st Squad. He was traveling two vehicles ahead of the assault vehicle when the blast erupted. He scrambled out to survey the damage from several yards away.

"I think the most frustrating thing is there's

## in Iraq by Kara Petrovic

**"N**ow, four-fifths of my soldiers are combat veterans," Adjutant General Brian Tarbet of the Utah National Guard recently declared. "That's an unheard of number. Even by World War II standards, it is a shift of monumental proportions."

Indeed, it is. Though 19% of U.S. troops in Iraq are now National Guard or Reserve, that wasn't so just a short time ago. In the first part of 2005, reserve unit members represented 43% of total American strength in the war zone. That included 8 National Guard brigades versus only two as of April.

Moreover, for the first time since the Korean War, an entire National Guard division was fully committed to a war theater. The 42nd Division (New York) drew manpower from nine states and included 40% regulars among its ranks.

Using reservists in overseas ventures has always been a risky political proposition. Deaths among active-duty troops are equally valued, but impact the public differently.

As Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution, said: "The tragedy of the citizen-soldier casualty is a loss of a member of the community who is usually a parent, husband or wife. It adds to the national pain when you see people from all different walks of life dying in combat. In that sense, the death of Guardsmen in Iraq compounds the national pain."

On the other hand, if the nation goes to war without the National Guard and Reserves, it seldom has the public behind it, as several Vietnam War historians have observed. So let's take a look at our citizen-soldiers in action from 10 units.



PHOTO COURTESY/ISOLDE ZIERK



PHOTOGRAPHER'S MATE AND CLASSIC ERIC POWELL / U.S. NAVY

U.S. Navy Seabees of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 14 pay their respects to their seven fallen comrades in May 2004. They were killed in two separate attacks within a 72-hour period. Five of the men were killed in a single mortar attack in Ramadi.

no sense of accomplishment,” Williams told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. “You’re biding your time and waiting. But then you lose your friends, and it’s not even for their own country’s freedom.”

Maj. Steve Lawson, the company’s commander, told the *Washington Post*, “They used to call it Lucky Lima. That turned around and bit us.”

Members of VFW Post 2505 in Columbus had been raising money and sending care packages to Lima Company. Later, Post Commander Jeff Mers said members were dazed from attending all the funerals.

“I think I’ve been to nine of these just in central Ohio in the past few months,” Mers told the Associated Press in August 2005. As Dave Carroll of Post 9340, located outside of Cleveland, put it, “It is our duty as members of the VFW to not let the country forget these sacrifices.”

Isolde Zierk became the coordinator for the Key Volunteer program, Lima Company’s family support group, in Columbus. Zierk (her son Sgt. Guy Zierk is in the weapons platoon) and eight other volunteers, mostly mothers, are liaisons between the Marine Corps and families. The volunteers handle everything except notifications of death.

VFW awarded Zierk a *Military Family Member Volunteer Service Award* at this year’s Legislative and Community Ser-

vice Conference in March.

Despite being part of one of the hardest hit U.S. units in Iraq, members witnessed at least a “spark of progress.”

“We know we made a positive difference,” Cpl. Jeff Schuller told the *Christian Science Monitor*. “I can’t say at what level, but I know that where we were, we made it better than it was when we got there.”

Lima Company returned home on Oct. 7, 2005, after sustaining 23 KIA (16 from Columbus) and 48 WIA during a seventh-month deployment. (The A&E Channel ran a documentary on Lima in May.) The 3rd Battalion counted 48 dead.

“All I can ask is that the American people be given more than the bombings and daily death toll,” Cpl. Jacob Arnett of the 3rd Battalion said, “because we are giving much more than that for Iraq.”

### “We Build, We Fight”: Seabees at Alpha Yard

Approximately 400 Navy Reserve Seabees from the 14th Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB 14) were deployed to Iraq April 17, 2004. It would be a fateful tour of duty.

Based in Jacksonville, Fla., the 14th is made up of sailors (average age 42) from Florida, Georgia and Puerto Rico. This was the unit’s first overseas deployment since World War II. It was stationed at Ramadi, site of an old Iraqi

military base that hosts Camp Fallujah, a U.S. Marine compound.

NMCB 14 had been in Iraq for only two weeks—assisting with civil engineering work and building structures for Marines—when it was hit. Seven Seabees were killed in two separate attacks—over a three day period—in Anbar province west of Baghdad.

On April 30, two Seabees died after an improvised explosive device (IED) hit the convoy vehicle in which they were riding. Six more were wounded. They were escorting supply and troop convoys on a Tactical Movement Team.

Two days later, on May 2, Rear Adm. Charles Kubic, commander of the First Naval Construction Division, met with about 40 sailors to inspect damaged vehicles in “alpha yard,” a vehicle parking and maintenance area.

Kubic and the Seabees were standing beside the vehicles when a mortar round struck with deadly accuracy, sending shrapnel flying. Five Seabees were immediately killed and 28 wounded.

“I felt, like, a shock wave came across,” Equipment Operator 2nd Class James Nappier, Jr., told *Navy Times*. “It knocked me down, and when I stood up, I was on fire.”

The wounded were quickly moved to Charlie Med, the camp’s medical station. Then Medevac helicopters took them to Fallujah where enhanced medical facilities were available.

“We’ll honor the courage and sacrifice of our fallen Seabees with our work,” Kubic said. “Their resolve is like steel.”

Nappier underscored the camaraderie of the unit: “We’re very tight,” he said. “It’s like one big family. It’s like we’ve been brothers all our lives. There isn’t anything we don’t do for each other in the military and in the civilian world.”

Some 60 reservists from NMCB 15 based in Belton, Mo., and 75 of the Engineer Group of I Marine Expeditionary Force were among the 1,100 Seabees (including active duty) serving in Iraq when the attack occurred. The 14th NMCB arrived back in Florida in November 2004.

### “Bowie Brigade”: Arkansas Guard

The 39th Infantry Brigade sent more than 3,000 soldiers to Iraq from April 2004 to April 2005. Though nicknamed

the “Arkansas Brigade,” Guardsmen from nine other states were among them. The brigade included the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 153rd Infantry, as well as the 2nd Bn., 162nd Inf. (Oregon National Guard).

Based at Camp Cooke in Taji, Iraq, the regular Army’s 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div., also was assigned to the 39th, rounding out the Brigade Combat Team (BCT). That secure base camp, however, did not prove to be a safe haven.

Mortar rounds slammed into the area occupied by the 39th Support Battalion, killing four men, on April 24, 2004. All four soldiers were based in the small town of Hazen, Ark. The “Bowie Brigade,” as it also is known, thus became the first National Guard unit to sustain a large loss in a single incident in Iraq.

“The loss here was a stark and somber illustration of why civic leaders and politicians had been loath to send National Guard troops into combat for nearly 50 years,” wrote staff writers Scott Gold and Rone Tempest in the *DeValls Bluff* (Ark.) *Times*. Nevertheless, “Hazen is trying to stand firm, to remain resolute in the belief that their Guardsmen died for a just and righteous cause.”

The unit had already attracted national attention. The Discovery Channel aired a three-episode special on the 39th—57 members of the 239th Engineer Company from Clarksville—that April.

Like all other American units in the war, the 39th would have its share of heroes. On Nov. 20, 2004, 26 men of 3rd Plt., C Co., 3rd Bn. (“Gunslingers”), 153rd Inf. Regt., took on 75 insurgents attacking an Iraqi police station in the Adhamiyah district of Baghdad, killing at least 30. The unit had four WIA. Platoon leader 1st Lt. Michael McCarty charged and single-handedly took out a three-man enemy machine gun crew.

He was awarded the Silver Star on Feb. 4, 2006. “I did what I do best,” he said, “I got out and closed with the enemy and destroyed them.” The lieutenant also commented: “There were 26 of us that started the mission, and if one man hadn’t done his job, then none of us would have come home.” McCarty is the second Silver Star recipient from Arkansas. Sgt. Russell Collier received it posthumously for Iraq in April 2005.

In April 2005, the last troops of the 39th came back to Arkansas. Determined that their fellow soldiers’ supreme

sacrifices not be forgotten, the unit memorialized their memories.

On Feb. 5, 2006, the Fallen Soldiers Memorial Wall was unveiled in Little Rock. It lists the 33 names of those killed while serving with the 39th, 16 of them from Arkansas. Some 270 more unit members were wounded.

### **Baqubah: Tarheels in Action**

The North Carolina Army National Guard’s 1st Battalion (“Tuskhogs”), 120th Infantry Regiment, 30th Separate Brigade (“Old Hickory”), deployed to Iraq in February 2004. The unit was attached to the 3rd BCT, 1st Infantry Division. Home-based in Wilmington, it performed pre-dawn bomb sweeps, among other duties, in eastern Iraq near the Iran border.

On June 24, A Company’s (“Wolverines”) 3rd Platoon was 30 minutes away from wrapping up a patrol in the violent city of Baqubah when more than 150 insurgents staged an ambush.

“It was one of those days we’ll be talking about for the rest of our lives,” Spc. Ralph Isabella told *Army Times*.

Insurgents—who were perched atop buildings—attacked with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), small-arms and heavy machine guns. The enemy surrounded the platoon’s three Bradley Fighting Vehicles on both sides of the road, but not for long.

The platoon sped a half-mile south, positioning itself facing the onrushing insurgents. “These guys were very organized,” Bradley commander Staff Sgt. Will Murray later remarked.

The unit was ordered to move closer to the enemy and keep the insurgents visible until reinforcements arrived.

“On the fourth time through, they started mortaring us off of a pedestrian crosswalk, and they were tossing down improvised explosive devices, but they missed,” Murray said.

Insurgents continued to fire RPGs, but so far no one was hurt. “When they hit the Bradley with an RPG, the explosion was like a white flash of sunlight,” Sgt. Jeff Derich related to the *Army Times*. “It feels like your brain is going to leak out your eyes.”

By 6 a.m., 3rd Platoon was heading north back to Warhorse, the unit’s forward operating base (FOB), to regroup.



Arkansas National Guard 1st Lt. Michael McCarty (right) calls for another box of ammunition for his .50-caliber sniper rifle at “Fort Apache” in Baghdad on Jan. 30, 2005. Two months earlier on Nov. 20, 2004, as a platoon leader in C Co., 3rd Bn., 39th BCT, McCarty earned the Silver Star.

PHOTO BY 1ST LT. CHRIS HEATHSCOTT, ARKANSAS NATIONAL GUARD STATE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Meanwhile, Alpha's 1st Platoon raced toward the city center to secure two bridges. Five Bradleys—two led by Capt. Christopher Cash and his executive officer—headed for the bridges where the ambush raged relentlessly.

At 6:20 a.m., an enemy machine gunner struck Cash. Spc. Daniel Desens was mortally wounded when an RPG tore through his Bradley. The blast also wounded five others, as well as knocking the commander unconscious.

After being wounded, Desens killed the man who fired the RPG. "We had to pry [Desens'] fingers off the gun," medic Isabella said.

The driver was unhurt, but the roar of battle prevented all radio contact. Reaching the bridges, 1st Platoon took the wounded back to the base to be evacuated. Cash and Desens died during the helicopter ride to the hospital in Balad.

An eight-hour firefight consumed the Wolverines, but they secured the bridges. Alpha Company estimated that it killed 30 to 40 insurgents. But losing two soldiers, among them their commander, and having six wounded, was a blow.

The 1st Bn., 120th Inf., lost four KIA and 19 WIA in Iraq. It redeployed stateside in January 2005. Its members had displayed courage under fire and demonstrated the unit's effectiveness.

PHOTO COURTESY CAPT. MATTHEW STAPLETON / NORTH CAROLINA NATIONAL GUARD



North Carolina Guardsmen of A Company, 1st Battalion, 120th Infantry Regiment, 30th Separate Brigade, take up positions during the Battle of Baqubah on June 24, 2004. The unit lost two KIA and 6 WIA, but killed some 40 insurgents.

### Louisiana "Black Sheep"

The Louisiana National Guard's 2nd Bn., 156th Mech. Inf. Regt., 256th BCT, deployed to Iraq in October 2004. A single incident would catapult the unit into

the national spotlight.

Based in the small fishing community of Houma, the battalion's Charlie Company served with other soldiers from Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York. The 69th Infantry Regiment (New York National Guard) was attached.

The 256th's area of operations in Iraq encompassed 1,250 square miles, including the city of Taji.

On Jan. 6, 2005, seven soldiers were killed—six from C Company (nicknamed the "Black Sheep") and one from the 69th—by a roadside bomb near Awad Al-Hussein. An explosive device, believed to have six to eight 155mm artillery rounds strapped together, hit their 50,000-pound Bradley, blowing it upside down.

This would be the single largest combat loss for a National Guard unit in Iraq.

Four of the soldiers killed were from Houma and nearby Raceland. Despite the devastating loss, most Houma residents like Lolly Fassbender—who lost her grandson, Sgt. Huey Fassbender, in the attack—still believed the war was worth fighting.

"We have to stay," Fassbender told the *London Times*. "For them [U.S. troops] to come out now, I would be angry.

Louisiana National Guardsmen of the 256th Brigade Combat Team patrol the streets of Iraq. Serving there in 2004-05, the unit sustained the second-highest number of KIA among National Guard outfits. The 2nd Battalion's C Company alone lost six KIA in one action.

PHOTO COURTESY LOUISIANA NATIONAL GUARD



Huey's death would be in vain." She continued: "Everyone here believes they must stay and finish the job."

Sarah Ferguson, who runs a local coffee shop, agreed. "It's just hardened attitudes," she said. "It's made us more passionate about the mission."

With such resolve, it is not surprising the unit's missions proved successful. "They are proud of their service," Maj. Gen. Gennett Landreneau told the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. "They are making a difference, and they know that."

The brigade detained more than 250 suspected insurgents, denied the enemy their "rocket boxes," which are used to launch mortars into American bases, and participated in humanitarian efforts in subsequent operations.

"It's a great source of pride to us," Brig. Gen. John Basilica, commander of the 256th, told the *Times-Picayune*. "But at a great, great cost and sacrifice."

Per capita, Louisiana has the largest number of residents in the Army

National Guard—4,000 served in Iraq.

Members of the 256th returned home in September 2005. Louisiana's Guard counted 21 KIA and 208 WIA. The 700 members of the legendary "Fighting 69th" (attached) lost 11 men in Iraq.

### "Raven 42": Day of the Silver Stars

The Kentucky Army National Guard's 617th Military Police Company, assigned to the 503rd MP Bn. (Fort Bragg), 18th MP Bde., deployed to Iraq on Nov. 27, 2004. The 150-person unit from Richmond protected convoys by operating 24-hour patrols on supply routes leading in and out of Baghdad.

On March 20, 2005, a 10-member squad—two women and eight men of 4th Platoon traveling in three armored Humvees using the call sign "Raven 42"—was providing security for 26 civilian tractor-trailers near Salman Pak, about 12 miles southeast of Baghdad. The trucks were moving supplies along an alternate supply route when 40 to 50

insurgents ambushed the convoy with RPGs and automatic weapons.

"We noticed seven vehicles the insurgents had staged and ready," Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein, who was on his second tour in Iraq, told the *Army News Service*. "Doors open, trucks open; ready for a quick escape. Once we turned down that road, the insurgents didn't have a choice but to stay and fight. We had just cut off their escape route."

As the squad's three Humvees roared forward, positioning themselves between the trucks and attackers, the insurgents' intentions changed.

"They quickly shifted all fire from the transportation convoy to us," said squad leader Nein.

Nein continued: "Once I knew how many people we were fighting against, it hit me we had to fight back extremely hard."

As the first Humvee raced toward a paved side road, an RPG hit it, but the vehicle kept moving. The other two

Military policemen of the Kentucky National Guard's 617th MP Company received medals from Lt. Gen. John R. Vines (center), commander, Multinational Corps, Iraq, during a ceremony at Camp Liberty in Iraq on June 16, 2005. Recipients are Spc. Jesse Ordunez, Sgt. Dustin Morris, Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein, Spc. Casey Cooper and Spc. Jason Mike. Hester, Nein and Mike received Silver Stars.





PHOTO COURTESY PENNSYLVANIA NATIONAL GUARD

Sgt. Phelan Piehota, 1st Lt. Christopher Wilson and Spc. Devin O’Neil of B Company, 1st Battalion, 109th Infantry Regiment of the Pennsylvania National Guard pose near some of the weapons they captured from insurgents in Ramadi on Jan. 29, 2006.

received its medals, a soldier from the 617th MP Company was killed in a RPG attack.

Sgt. 1st Class Marshall Ware, who served 10 years on active duty before joining the Army National Guard, said the company had been preparing “since Day 1” for such a firefight.

“The Guard is not the same Guard it was two years ago,” Ware told *National Guard* magazine. “They’re as good as any active-duty unit.”

The 617th MP Company returned home Oct. 31, 2005, after sustaining two KIA and 34 WIA in Iraq.

### Keystone Troopers in the Sunni Triangle

Elements of the 109th Inf., 55th “Strike” Brigade and the 111th Inf., 56th Stryker BCT of the 28th Division (Pennsylvania National Guard) deployed to Iraq in November and December 2004.

Alpha Company (153 soldiers) of the 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry—mostly from the Philadelphia region—were based at FOB Summerall near Beiji, 110 miles north of Baghdad. They were part of Task Force Dragoon (750 strong). Early months of their tour were relatively fatality-free.

But August 2005 proved to be a deadly month for the Pennsylvanians. On the

Humvees followed close behind and opened fire on the terrorists. Three of the four soldiers within the third Hummer bailed out to fight, as one continued to rain fire from the vehicle. In mere moments, three of the four were wounded.

As medic Spc. Jason Mike and another soldier ran over to assist the three wounded MPs, Nein and team leader Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester ran toward the lead trench line, tossing grenades as they went.

“On the right hand side was a berm,” Hester told the Army News Service. “They were still shooting at us from there and from down in a trench line.”

Suddenly, the firing stopped. Bodies littered the trenches and nearby orchard. The only sounds were cries from the wounded.

In 45 minutes, the MP squad had killed 24 insurgents, wounded six (two later died) and captured one.

“We’re infantry with badges, is the way I like to refer to it,” Nein said.

On June 16, 2005, at Baghdad’s Camp Liberty in Iraq, Hester, Nein and Mike received the Silver Star, the Army’s third-highest award for valor. Five other squad members also received awards for

valor—three received the Bronze Star and two the Army Commendation Medal with V devices. Spc. Ashley J. Pullen, Hester’s driver and one of the Bronze Star recipients, said, “It is important to give credit to all who are due the recognition.”

The same week the Raven 42 squad

Guardsmen from the 1st Battalion, 155th Brigade Combat Team (Mississippi National Guard) on duty in Iraq. One of their jobs was to tame the city of Najaf, one of Islam’s holiest places. They successfully did so, earning praise from President Bush.



PHOTO BY SGT. 1ST CLASS KEVIN REEVES / 155TH BRIGADE, MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL GUARD

# National Guard and Reserve Casualties

Citizen-soldiers have sustained 22% of KIA and 24% WIA in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

**National Guard  
Reserves  
Totals**

AFGHANISTAN			IRAQ		
KIA	NON-HOSTILE		KIA	NON-HOSTILE	
	DEATHS	WIA		DEATHS	WIA
25	16	102	290	88	3,114
11	13	46	184	49	1,776
<b>36</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>474</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>4,890</b>

As of Sept. 30, 2006 Source: Defense Manpower Data Center

6th, two members of A Company were KIA by an IED while patrolling Beiji.

Then on the 9th, four men of 2nd Plt., A Co., died when their Humvee was nearly obliterated after insurgents set off a bomb located in a culvert under Smuggler's Road in Beiji. Another Keystone State Guardsman was killed separately on the same day.

"I consider this hallowed ground now," Army Lt. Col. Philip J. Logan, TF Dragoon commander, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "We're not going to have locals traipsing through it."

The pain was felt at home, too, especially in Plymouth Meeting, 1st Battalion's base. "Seven Guardsmen in less than four days—it brings home the crushing reality of this war," Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell said.

"We're in a dangerous situation; this is the Sunni Triangle," said Capt. Anthony Callum, A Company commander. "But at the end of the deployment, the soldiers are going to be proud of what they accomplished. They need to feel that pride. They don't need to go home feeling we failed because we lost six soldiers."

The following month, on Sept. 19, a roadside bomb in Ramadi killed three more Pennsylvania Guardsmen, this time from the 104th Cav and 109th Infantry. A New York Guardsman of the 42nd Division also was killed in the explosion.

On Sept. 28, 109th Infantry soldiers were securing construction of a railroad bridge near Ramadi when a bomb, made of five or six artillery shells, exploded underneath their Bradley. An insurgent ambush with RPGs and small-arms fire followed. Five C Company soldiers died in the attack.

## National Guard Fatalities in Iraq—10 Highest by Hostile Fire

As of Oct. 7, 2006

STATE	HOSTILE	NON-HOSTILE	TOTAL
Pennsylvania	25	3	<b>28</b>
Louisiana	21	1	<b>22</b>
California	19	3	<b>22</b>
Georgia	15	13	<b>28</b>
New York	15	6	<b>21</b>
Mississippi	15	3	<b>18</b>
Arkansas	15	2	<b>17</b>
Tennessee	12	4	<b>16</b>
Illinois	11	5	<b>16</b>
Michigan, Iowa	11	1	<b>12</b>

Note: Vermont is often cited as the state with highest per capita losses with 8 KIA.

Source: Statistical Information Analysis Division, Defense Manpower Data Center.

While members of the 111th Infantry landed back on Pennsylvania soil in October 2005, the 2nd BCT (28th ID) remained in Iraq later. All told, the Pennsylvania National Guard sustained 25 KIA and 217 WIA as of April 2006.

### Mississippi's 155th BCT Showcases Najaf

When 3,500 troops of the 155th Brigade Combat Team (Mississippi National Guard) arrived in Iraq in January 2005, they included soldiers from Arkansas, Utah and Vermont. The 2nd Bn., 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, which trained with the 155th, was attached.

Serving with the 1st and 2nd Marine Expeditionary Forces, the Tupelo-based unit operated in Karbala, Najaf and Babil provinces. The city of Najaf is one of the holiest places in Islam.

Patrolling from FOBs with names like Kalsu and Iskandariyah, the Guardsmen ventured "outside the wire," a reference to operations beyond heavily fortified

U.S. military compounds.

"Even the paved roads have been blown up so many times they are like gravel," Sgt. Michael Homes remarked after getting a taste of the countryside.

On March 29, four soldiers, among them Spc. William Brooks, assigned to Det. 1, HQ Co., 1st Bn., were blown out of their Humvee when it was hit by an IED near Baghdad. Brooks lost both of his legs just below the knee.

"It was the worst combat experience I've had," said Sgt. Richard Anthony, who was riding in a vehicle that just missed the device before the explosion.

VFW Post 10567 in Southaven, Miss., held a benefit auction that July in Brooks' honor, raising more than \$24,000.

"If God would grow my legs back, I'd be on the first plane back to Iraq," Brooks said, exemplifying the esprit de corps of his outfit.

Tragedy struck again on May 23, when four Guardsmen of HQ and C companies, 1st Bn., 155th Inf., were killed by an IED in Haswa.

By September, the 155th began turning responsibilities in its area of operations over to the Iraqis. And by December, Najaf had become a showcase of progress.

"They were receptive; they actually wanted to take control of their own area," Sgt. 1st Class Paul Bedford of the Recon Plt., 1st Bn., 198th Armor, told the *New York Times*. "Assessment would be more the word than training at this point."

A change in attitude was clearly evident. "The people didn't really talk to us that much [at first]," Brig. Gen. Augustus L. Collins explained to the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*. "But now [after a year in country] they've opened up to us, and they see the way to peace is

through this democratic idea that we're trying to share with them."

The last members of the 155th ("Dixie Thunder") returned to Camp Shelby in mid-January 2006. Guardsmen counted 13 hostile deaths and 110 WIA.

### "Night Stalkers": California Guard

In February 2005, 685 soldiers of the California National Guard's 1st Bn., 184th Inf. Regt., arrived in Iraq. Headquartered in Modesto, the unit would soon receive more public scrutiny than it bargained for.

Three of its companies were assigned to patrol the Dora district of southern Baghdad—one of the city's toughest sectors. Not even halfway through their tour, the "Night Stalkers" (the battalion's nickname) found themselves in the media glare for the misdeeds of a few. Because some soldiers were court-martialed for dereliction of duty and mishandling prisoners, all were tarnished.

"But what never made it into print were the things that will mark our hearts until well after we become old-timers down at the VFW," 1st Lt. Robert C.J. Perry, a battalion officer, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. "We never flinched in a fight. But we were smeared nonetheless."

Seven unit members died in September in multiple roadside bomb blasts. On Sept. 16 alone, three were killed when



PHOTO BY SFC. DAN BALDA / U.S. ARMY

Soldiers of the California National Guard's 1st Battalion, 184th Infantry Regiment, speak with an Iraqi citizen while on patrol on Dec. 12, 2005. The "Night Stalkers," as the unit is nicknamed, served in Iraq for 10 months. Despite initial negative media publicity, they demonstrated dedication to duty and courage under fire.

two tanks absorbed explosions.

On Oct. 25, Lt. Col. William Wood, the new unit commander and an active-duty officer, promised his battalion he would do his utmost to reduce casualties. But 48 hours later, Wood himself lost his life to a roadside bomb while trying to help soldiers in a Humvee that had just been disabled. Wood is the highest-ranking U.S. officer killed in Iraq to date. (He was posthumously promoted to colonel.)

Jim Wood, William's brother and a long-time VFW member, said, "We are extremely proud of my brother. By serving in Iraq, he was upholding an honorable family tradition."

On Oct. 29, two more soldiers were

killed when the battalion led *Operation Clean Sweep*, raiding 350 houses and capturing more than 40 suspected insurgents in Baghdad.

This successful mission helped "put these guys back up on a pedestal, where they should be," said Lt. Col. Denton Knapp, the battalion's third commander and also active-duty Army.

The 184th returned home after 10 months in Iraq on Jan. 16, 2006. The battalion lost 10 killed and 100 WIA. Some 14 Bronze Stars for valor went to unit members. The "Night Stalkers" also have been nominated for a Valorous Unit Award.

### Georgia Bulldogs in the "Triangle of Death"

The 48th BCT represents the largest overseas deployment of Georgia National Guard members since WWII. Among its 4,300 soldiers are 2,500 Georgians. Others in the unit come from Alabama, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri and Puerto Rico.

Deployed to Iraq in May 2005, the 48th conducted combat patrols southwest of Baghdad (including the infamous "Triangle of Death") and assisted with convoy and base security.

But nothing could prepare the unit for what was coming—11 deaths in 11 days. Starting off, a pair of fatal bombings claimed the lives of eight soldiers of a single platoon in A Co., 2nd Bn., 121st Inf. Regt.

On July 24, the first four died when their Humvee rolled over a massive bomb on Route Aeros, close to the Iraqi capital.

Six days later, on July 30, four more soldiers were KIA in a similar attack on Route Red Sox. The unit was just min-

On July 7, 2005, Georgia National Guardsmen of B Company, 2nd Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment, along with Iraqi soldiers, apprehend three suspects responsible for setting off a roadside bomb near Al-Radwnea. Georgia Guardsman sustained 15 KIA in Iraq.



PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. HERVALDO RAMON / U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

utes away from the base's entrance. Both vehicles involved in the explosion literally disintegrated. The only remaining pieces from the second Humvee were two front tires, two back tires and an engine block.

"These are people you knew, that you trained with, you laughed with," Sgt. Bill Jones told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "You become angry real quick. You want to get the bastard who did this."

Then on Aug. 3, a suicide car bomber at a traffic checkpoint in Baghdad killed three soldiers and wounded three more from the 648th Engineer Battalion.

"Our future actions will not bring them back but will honor their memory," commander Lt. Col. Steve McCorkle said to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "Their sacrifice will not be in vain."

The next morning, a new mission was planned after local Iraqis provided intelligence on specific insurgents who were responsible for some of the 11 deaths. The brigade established a new patrol camp, "Lions Den," intended to

take territory away from the enemy. On Aug. 4, brigade elements searched 14 houses and buildings, and seized 45 Iraqis for questioning.

By October 2005, the 48th was approaching its sixth month in country and had lost 22 soldiers—17 in combat and five in accidents.

"That much loss drops anybody to their knees," Brig. Gen. Stewart Rodeheaver told the *Columbus* (Ga.) *Ledger-Enquirer*. "But our guys did a tremendous job of coming back and doing great things after that. ... Morale is extremely high. They're proud of what they're doing, and they do a great job."

In mid-November, the 48th BCT ("Old Gray Bonnet"), headquartered south of Baghdad at Camp Striker, was split up for security reasons.

The brigade's spirit took another hit when a vehicle rollover killed three members in early December near Nasiriyah. But the unit pressed on.

The 48th's last combat patrol was conducted March 31, 2006. It arrived home in May, after losing 19 Guardsmen and

175 WIA during its deployment.

### Proven Mettle in Battle

Clearly, the National Guard long ago shed the characterization of "weekend warriors." Unit members have proven their military value time and again in both Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years. Currently, one BCT—the 1st, 34th Infantry Division (Minnesota National Guard)—is serving in Iraq.

At their peak in March 2005, 50,285 Guardsmen were stationed in Iraq. So far, 13 Army National Guard combat brigades have rotated through that war zone. Though the number of Guard soldiers has been reduced to 23,000, the Guard will have a presence there. "The National Guard is not coming out of the war," said Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, head of the National Guard Bureau.

Casualties attest to the combat role of the National Guard and the Reserves with a total of 487 KIA and 4,766 WIA in both theaters of war. The dedication and bravery of reservists in battle is now fully recognized by all Americans. 🌟

## Firebase Tomahawk: The National Guard's Deadliest Day in Vietnam

**The Army National Guard's** single deadliest action of the Vietnam War came on June 19, 1969. Ten members of C Battery, 2nd Battalion, 138th Field Artillery (Kentucky National Guard), were killed that day at Firebase Tomahawk.

Perched atop a saddle-shaped hill astride Highway 1, 19 miles southeast of Hue, it was a prime enemy target. "This is a terrible place to be," recalled one officer when he first saw it. Besides the 120-man artillery battery—90% of whom hailed from the Bardstown area of Kentucky—the firebase was manned by a platoon from C Co., 2nd Bn., 501st Inf., 101st Abn. Div.

At 1:30 a.m., the 72nd Sapper Company of the North Vietnamese Army's 4th Regiment attacked, quickly breaching the perimeter. "During the first 15 or 20 minutes, I didn't think we were gonna make it," Ronnie Hibbs remembered. It would be a tough night indeed for the citizen-soldiers.

"Seems like we fought for hours and

hours," Reuben Simpson said, "but it really wasn't that long. When I went out at first light, I was amazed at what little was left. The whole hill was just about gone."

An estimated 150 enemy rocket-propelled grenades and satchel charges had destroyed three howitzers (and disabled one), an ammo storage area, nine bunkers, the mess hall, the dining tent, a maintenance area, four ammo carriers and three jeeps.

Of the 10 artillerymen killed, five were actually active-duty soldiers infused into the Kentucky battery. One of the five Kentuckians was killed by friendly fire. A total of 45 Guardsmen were wounded. The 101st platoon lost four KIA and 13 WIA. Some 27 NVA sapper bodies were counted.

Though Bardstown, population 5,000, is sometimes referred to as suffering the highest per capita loss of the war (its surrounding area sustained 17 killed), that dubious distinction actually belongs to Beallsville, Ohio. With only 475 resi-

dents, it sacrificed six of its sons.

Yet "Bardstown would become a symbol of how deep into America the war had reached, and few, if any, communities in this land felt the impact of the war as did the people here," wrote Jim Wilson, author of *The Sons of Bardstown: 25 Years of Vietnam in an American Town*.

This is no doubt today an experience being re-lived by several communities with the heavy use of National Guard and Reserve troops in Iraq.

**Editor's Note:** About 9,000 Army National Guard personnel served in Vietnam as unit members, individual volunteers or replacements. Of them, 22 were KIA. The Air National Guard lost five KIA. The only National Guard infantry unit in Vietnam was Indiana's D Company (Ranger), 151st Infantry.

Operating out of a base near Long Binh, D Company's 172 Guardsmen (plus 32 regulars) carried out long-range recon patrols. It suffered two KIA and 100 WIA during its 1969 tour.

# Saving Lives, One Roadside Bomb at a

# Time



In February, *VFW* magazine's senior editor visited soldiers in Iraq who search for improvised explosive devices—the enemy's most lethal weapon. The Missouri National Guard's 110th Combat Engineer Battalion's mission is to risk their lives to protect their fellow GIs.

*Story and photos by*  
**Tim Dyhouse**

**L**ying on the shoulder of the road, the old inner tube looked harmless. To the untrained eye, it appeared to be just another piece of trash on a dirty Iraqi highway.

But upon closer inspection, this inner tube wasn't lying flat and deflated. It bulged in the middle and twine fastened the rubber around both ends of the bulge. Most important to the soldiers who patrol this section of the highway daily, it wasn't lying there the day before. This piece of trash was suspicious.

Immediately, the soldiers of Support Plt., C Co., 110th Combat Eng. Bn.—a Missouri National Guard unit tasked with finding roadside bombs—scrambled into action. The driver of their vehicle—a massive, well-armed bomb-hunting machine called a “Buffalo”—maneuvered the behemoth alongside the shoulder to examine, or “interrogate,” the suspicious object. The platoon's other three vehicles halted traffic on both sides of the busy four-lane divided highway.

Working from within the Buffalo's cab, a soldier operated the vehicle's “spork,” a backhoe-like hydraulic arm, and delicately pawed at the inner tube with an amazingly light touch. Determining that it contained a solid object, he quickly alerted his platoon members to the danger.

“It's an IED [improvised explosive device],” he shouted into the radio.

The Buffalo driver immediately moved the vehicle some 200 yards away, while the platoon's other three vehicles established a wide perimeter, or cordon. The platoon leader called in an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team and alerted a quick reaction force from a nearby unit of the 101st Airborne Division.

As the late morning traffic on Highway 1 about 50 miles south of Baghdad began to pile up, a car pulled out of the south-bound lane, turned off the highway and onto a side road heading toward the bomb site. Manning the perimeter with their M-16s, Support Platoon's soldiers expected the worst.



The car, loaded with several Iraqis identified as the possible bomb “droppers,” was moving within detonation range of the IED. Without hesitation, Sgt. 1st Class James Byron Kindell, a Persian Gulf War vet and the platoon's senior member, fired two warning shots in front of the car before it could venture into the platoon's cordon. The car stopped, and the occupants bailed out.

Five minutes later, soldiers spotted another car fitting the description of one leaving the scene of an earlier IED explosion. It was headed toward a second IED found minutes after the first on the opposite side of the highway.



Spc. Nicholas Guitian, Sgt. Jory Buchweitz and Spc. Mathew Leaf of 4th Platoon, A Company, 164th Engineer Battalion (attached to the 110th Eng. Bn.), examine a piece of shrapnel they found in an IED blast hole. The roadside bomb exploded 500 yards ahead of the soldiers only minutes earlier as terrorists attempted to destroy a passing convoy.

This car, too, was turned back with a few rounds of warning shots courtesy of 101st Airborne paratroopers.

“It’s really kind of frustrating for the guys,” explained Sgt. Warren Benigar of Greenwood, Mo., who served as commander of the platoon’s lead vehicle

that day. “We find these IEDs all the time, and here’s finally a chance to take a shot at the guys who are laying them.”

Shortly thereafter, a large explosion erupted about a mile south of the cordon. Soldiers later concluded a would-be terrorist incinerated himself and his small pickup truck while attempting to plant yet another IED in the area.

Eventually, an Army EOD team (the Navy and Air Force also field such units) arrived and discovered that the inner tube camouflaged a 122mm artillery shell. Using their own charges, the team detonated it and the bomb found on the other side of the highway. Later that day,

radio reports confirmed that 101st Airborne soldiers had apprehended the bombs’ suspected triggerman.

### **Eliminating IEDs**

This three-hour incident illustrates the daily work of the 110th Combat Engineers. The Missouri National Guard battalion’s main job is “route clearance,” basically finding roadside bombs along sections of Highway 1, Iraq’s main north-south traffic artery stretching from Turkey to Kuwait.

As the battalion’s Command Sgt. Maj. Will Pierce of Mountain View, Mo., says, “Our mission is to save soldiers’ lives by

putting our own lives at risk. Our task is to eliminate the enemy's No. 1 weapon."

The battalion's nearly 500 men and women comprise four companies and a headquarters staff based at three locations. The 110th's staff officers and Headquarters Company are at Baghdad, after moving from Tallil in March.

"The center of Iraq's population is Baghdad, and that's where the enemy's munitions and orders come from," said Lt. Col. Mitchell Passini, the 110th's commander. "The move allows us to find even more IEDs and help find the people who are placing them."

B Company, also located at Baghdad, is responsible for "sanitation," such as clearing debris off the highway's shoulders and medians and filling holes. In essence, B Company soldiers remove possible hiding places for IEDs.

C Company is based at Scania, a major convoy-refueling center off Highway 1 about 100 miles south of Baghdad. In a typical week, its soldiers find five to six IEDs along their assigned section of the highway. Their attitude typifies the battalion's gusto for finding bombs.

"I love this job," said Sgt. Scharles Patterson of 1st Platoon, a 24-year-old spork operator from Blue Springs, Mo.



Lt. Jason Peterson (far right) of 4th Plt., A Co., 164th Eng. Bn., briefs his soldiers at Camp Anaconda before a route clearance mission in February. Peterson warned that an IED found the night before had consisted of an artillery shell filled with gasoline—a new twist in the terrorists' tactics.

"I know it sounds crazy, but there's nothing else I'd rather do over here."

A Company works in the 110th's "hottest" area of operations near Balad, about 50 miles north of Baghdad.

"We're in high demand," said A Company commander Maj. Jason Steckler, a 36-year-old married father of three from Bismarck, N.D. "I would challenge you

to find any unit over here with 138 members that has saved as many lives as us."

Based at Camp Anaconda, A Company is part of the 164th Engineers, a North Dakota National Guard unit attached to the 110th for the deployment. Known as the "Trailblazers," A Company soldiers found 91 IEDs between Dec. 5, 2005 and Feb. 13, 2006, more than one a day. As a C Company soldier said, "The guys at Anaconda are looking for IEDs as soon as they leave the wire [the camp]."

It's painstaking work, inching along the highway at about 20 mph, while stopping and investigating anything that could hide an IED, such as discarded tires, old blast holes, hay bales, burlap sacks, trash bags and animal carcasses.

"Anywhere else in the world, a tire lying by the roadside would be just that, but not here," said Lt. David Longhiblinger of 1st Plt., C Co., a 32-year-old father of four from High Ridge, Mo.

"My father always told me, 'If you're looking for trouble, you're going to find it.' In the Army, that's what we do. I don't mind doing this kind of work over here, so that we never have to do it in the States."

Kindell says human bodies have been used to conceal IEDs. "They [terrorists] know that Americans, having compassion for other human beings, will stop and investigate something like that," said the VFW life member from Moberly, Mo. "We don't do that anymore."



Spc. John Marshall, a medic from Carthage, Mo., stands guard while Sgt. Scharles Patterson of Blue Springs, Mo., prepares to "smoke," or burn, an abandoned tire in the median of Highway 1 south of Baghdad last February. The two soldiers from 1st Plt., C Co., 110th Combat Eng. Bn., destroyed the tire so the enemy could not use it as camouflage for an IED.

## Looking at Life Differently

**The 110th** is like a lot of National Guard units. Its members "have a wide range of [civilian] occupations," according to Lt. Mike Roberts, who leads Support Plt., Headquarters Co., 110th Eng. Bn.

A quick survey showed the battalion counts a factory worker, welder, bartender, auto salesman, prison guard, heavy equipment operator, college instructor and at least one police officer in its ranks. Roberts, though, may have the most unique job. He is a weatherman for KRCG-TV, the CBS affiliate in Jefferson City, Mo.



Lt. Mike Roberts

"My deployment has created some stress on the station," said the 38-year-old married father of three children, "but management has been supportive."

Roberts says he signed a new five-year contract with the station before leaving for Iraq and will continue his television career once he gets back.

Many of the 110th's soldiers say they will return to civilian life with a greater appreciation for the standard of living offered in the United States.

"I know a lot of guys say they're going to look at life a lot differently when they get back home," said Sgt. Scharles Patterson, a 24-year-old spork operator with C Company who works for a construction company in Blue Springs, Mo. "I hope they do. I hope they're going to be motivated to pursue a constructive life back home. I know when I look at the level of poverty over here, I'm thankful for my life in America. I love my country, and I'm going to fight for it for as long as I have to."

IEDs are the deadliest weapons in the enemy arsenal, accounting for more than two-thirds of all hostile U.S. deaths in Iraq in the last half of 2005. Between July 1 and Dec. 31, 2005, Pentagon statistics show that 368 uniformed Americans were killed by enemy action. Of those, 251, or 68%, were killed by IEDs. During that period an additional 19 GIs died by suicide car bombers, seven from landmines and three from "explosions."

All told, these deadly devices had claimed 739 GIs' lives by March 18, 2006. Last year, IEDs inflicted 72% of all wounds on Americans.

Through the middle of February, the 110th reported that only a few of its soldiers had been wounded with no fatalities since arriving in the war zone in November 2005. The battalion's S-3 officer (in charge of plans, operations and training) attributes that record to his soldiers' attention to detail, which they will strive to maintain throughout their yearlong tour.

"When a unit gets toward the end of its deployment, it's easy for soldiers to think they're experts and don't have to follow procedures," said Maj. Paul Kirchoff, a 37-year-old married father of two boys from Jefferson City, Mo. "That's when people get killed."

One statistic 110th soldiers were especially proud of and one they mentioned several times during *VFW* magazine's visit is that they save 1.7 lives for every IED they find.

### A Loud Jolt and a Plume of Smoke

Though it's probably their least-favorite method, 110th soldiers occasionally "find" IEDs when they explode in their midst. Sgt. Jory Buchweitz, a vehicle commander with 4th Plt., A Co., said about 25% of the IEDs found by his company had exploded before an EOD team could dispose of them.

In fact, during a route clearance mission in which *VFW* magazine joined the platoon, Buchweitz's Buffalo sported a patch of new armor welded over a section that had taken an IED blast earlier in the week.

"We probably have the hottest AO [area of operations] up here," said Buchweitz, a 32-year old father of two from Minot, N.D. "But usually when we have passengers, we get no [IED] finds for the day."

This mission would be different.

It began fairly routinely, with soldiers checking several suspicious objects, all of

which proved negative. 4th Platoon's vehicles also passed three demolished 18-wheeled commercial trucks, shredded and still smoking from IED blasts the night before.

After about four hours, 4th Platoon's vehicles completed a patrol in the northbound lanes of Highway 1 and crossed over to scan the southbound lanes.

Suddenly, an 18-wheeled tractor-trailer escorted by three Blackwater Security Consulting pickups with machine guns mounted in the beds roared by the Buffalo at high speed. It caught the attention of the soldiers, since they only allow military or private security-led convoys to pass them while conducting route-clearance missions.

As the fast-moving convoy drifted back into the right lane in front of 4th Platoon, the soldiers resumed their bomb-hunting mission, scanning the sides of the highway.

Within seconds, a loud explosion jolted the soldiers. Up ahead some 500 yards, a black plume of smoke billowed exactly where the Blackwater convoy had just passed a slight dip in the road.

"That was those Blackwater guys," yelled the medic, Spc. Jonathan Winkler, as he scrambled for his first-aid kit.

## Three Types of Detonations

IEDs explode through one of three methods:

- **Command** detonation requires a wire running directly from the bomb to a triggering device.
- **Remote** detonation is accomplished with a signal sent from a cell phone or similar mechanism.
- **Pressure** detonation occurs when a vehicle strikes an IED.



DOD PHOTOS

"They've got no armor."

Expecting to find a gruesome scene, 4th Platoon's soldiers instead found nothing except a large hole in the side of the road. The convoy had been traveling fast enough, and the triggerman was slow enough, that the IED exploded harmlessly. 4th Platoon had passed the site no less than 10 minutes earlier on the opposite side of the highway.

"This is where those little girls were waving at us," Buchweitz announced angrily as the Buffalo pulled up to the blast site. "And I'm sure they know nothing."

The little girls were gone.

Scrambling out of the vehicles, the soldiers searched for clues. Some patrolled the ground while others sifted through the blast hole.

"This is the crap that's killing us," said Buchweitz as he held up a jagged, four-inch-long piece of shrapnel.

They quickly determined the bomb was a 130mm artillery shell. They also

found pieces of a circuit board from a Motorola cell phone, proving detonation was remote-controlled.

Quickly, their attention focused on a house directly opposite the blast site a few hundred yards away on an outer road. Mission commander Lt. Jason Peterson ordered two squads to cordon off the house, while the Buffalo guarded a canal crossing on the road.

Within half an hour, a 4th Infantry Division quick reaction force of two M-1 Abrams battle tanks and a Humvee arrived. Soon, two Kiowa helicopters began circling the house. Three Iraqi Army vehicles arrived, too. It was their soldiers who searched the house.

U.S. soldiers in the Buffalo weren't optimistic about apprehending any bad guys. "According to Iraqi law," one said, "if you don't catch them in the act or on tape, they'll walk."

True enough, the Iraqi soldiers found only an old man complaining of chest pains, which Winkler dutifully checked

out. The medic returned, and 4th Platoon was soon back on the highway.

In the dark, they renewed their search for IEDs, which these soldiers know better than most can hit at any time. It's frustrating for them because there is no human enemy at which to strike back. With IEDs, terrorists fight by hiding in bushes or homes near the road, triggering a bomb and running away. It requires none of the courage displayed by American soldiers, who would be more than willing to fight it out face-to-face.

As 4th Platoon's mission continued, this time with powerful lights illuminating both sides of the highway, Sgt. Buchweitz voiced the feelings of soldiers in Iraq who face the threat of IEDs—that is, all of them.

"There's a lot of holes on this road," he said, intently peering out the window. "We need to catch this guy." ☛

**Editor's Note:** Three engineers from these units were KIA.

## Featured on Film

The film industry has had a fascination with the citizen-soldiers of the National Guard and Reserves as a result of Iraq. And all four productions to date rate high marks.

The Discovery Channel got the ball rolling with *Off to War* in April 2004. The three-episode documentary follows 57 members of the 239th Engineer Company of the Arkansas National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team from and back to their hometown of Clarksville.

NBC offered *Tom Brokaw Reports: To War and Back* in time for Veterans Day 2005. It traced the post-war lives of six veterans of the Nighthawk Plt., C Co., 108th Inf. Regt., of the New York National Guard based in Glens Falls. They perhaps typify what today's Guard returnees face in their home communities after experiencing war.

The A&E Channel's excellent *Combat Diary: The Marines of Lima Company* aired around Memorial Day 2006. This two-hour documentary covered all aspects of the 3rd Bn., 25th Marines unit's experience. Based in Columbus,

Ohio, the Marine Reserve outfit was the hardest hit of all U.S. units in Iraq.

Generally regarded as the most unique effort so far is *The War Tapes*. Produced by SenArt Films and shown in movie theaters, this documentary was filmed by the actual participants themselves. Armed also with videos, five men serve as "soldiers with cameras." They record the actions of C Co., 3rd Bn., 172nd Inf., New Hampshire National Guard, as it conducts convoy security missions in the Sunni Triangle.

Tracking three of the men's lives before, during and after their tour, as well as their families, they become unforgettable. As *New York Times* film critic Stephen Holden wrote, "They are the bedrock of who we are as a nation."

All of these documentaries allow the Marines and soldiers to speak for themselves. They show life as it was in the war zone or is at home without editorializing. But unlike the several box office movies produced by Hollywood about Sept. 11, 2001, they do not focus on the individual courage displayed.

Civilian airline passengers, firefighters



and police officers are made heroes on the big screen while valor in a military uniform is off limits. Yet a Navy Cross and at least 19 Silver Stars have been awarded to reservists and National Guardsmen to date.

Ironically, *Newsweek* reviewers of the film *World Trade Center* termed the United Flight 93 passengers "modern-day Minutemen." But citizen-soldiers risking their lives daily overseas garner no such accolades from Hollywood.

**W**hile media attention has been riveted on Iraq, the war goes on in Afghanistan. And reserve forces have played a valuable role there, too. By August 2002, more than 9,000 National Guard troops were in that theater of operations. As of May 2006, the National Guard still had 8,311 soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan.

And it is not just in a logistical role. Combat units have ranged from Special Forces (19th and 20th SF group detachments) to infantry battalions of the 116th Infantry (Virginia), 168th Infantry (Iowa) and 148th Infantry (Kentucky) regiments. All of the above have sustained killed in action in Afghanistan.

Currently, the primary mission of Guard brigades is to train the Afghan National Army (ANA). That mission falls under Task Force Phoenix. The 45th (Oklahoma) and 76th (Indiana) brigades have already rotated through the country. The 53rd (Florida) was replaced by the 41st (Oregon) Brigade in Afghanistan in the summer of 2006.

All told, reserve units have suffered 31 hostile deaths—22 Guard and 9 Reserve—in the Afghanistan War. This casualty count includes three Green Berets. On three occasions, reserve outfits lost four men in a single incident. Here's a brief account of each of those three actions.

### **Trainers Fall to a Landmine**

Indiana's 76th Infantry Brigade went to Afghanistan to train, mentor and assist the ANA as part of Coalition Joint Task Force Phoenix in August 2004. Operating out of Kabul, the 1,100 soldiers (based in Indianapolis) fulfilled that goal but at the tragic price of four lives in one day.

On March 26, 2005, a vehicle from the unit's HQ & HQ Company hit a landmine leftover from another war while scouting for a site for a shooting range. Though the Taliban claimed credit, an investigation revealed otherwise. Apparently, precipitation had washed up the deeply buried and still-deadly device.

Cpl. Michael Wooten expressed the frustration of many Americans serving in a war zone where the enemy is largely invisible. "They don't want to stand and

# Afghanistan: The Other Theater

by Richard K. Kolb



GIs of A Co., 3rd Bn., 141st Inf. Regt., Texas Army National Guard, patrol on June 10, 2005.

fight," he told the *Indianapolis Star*. "They want to hide and ambush. That's what we're dealing with. You don't really know who's who or where anything is going to happen until it happens."

### **Aviators Take a Hit**

D Company of the 113th Aviation Regiment furnished two detachments to the war: Detachment 1 based in Pendleton, Ore., and another from Stead, Nev. The 100-man company specialized in air assault infiltrations, search-and-rescue missions and combat evacuations.

It was during an insertion on Sept. 25, 2005, that one of the unit's CH-47 Chinooks was shot down. Just after dropping off troops in southern Zabul province southwest of Deh Chopan, the helicopter took a hit in its fuel tank from a rocket-propelled grenade.

Four crewmen from the Guard died along with an active-duty soldier.

"While the death of any soldier is tragic," Oregon Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski said, "these deaths of our Guardsmen fall particularly close to home because these soldiers are our brothers, sisters, neighbors, co-workers and friends."

### **IED Claims Combat Engineers**

The Army Reserve's 391st Engineer Battalion supplied 570 combat engineers from its Carolina-based companies. They worked on roads, but also had the dangerous task of clearing minefields. And Afghanistan is generally regarded as the most heavily mined country in the world.

On March 12, 2006, battalion elements were clearing a route west of Asadabad in the Pech Valley of Kunar province. Suddenly, an improvised explosive device detonated near one of the Humvees, killing four engineers. Three of the men were from A Company based in Asheville, N.C. The fourth was assigned to Headquarters Company out of Greenville, S.C. Two of the men were veterans of Iraq.

Despite the sacrifices, most of the Americans who have served in Afghanistan understand the value of the support role being played, as well as the patience required. As the 391st's Sgt. Christopher Page told the *Mideast Stars & Stripes*, "The Afghanistan National Army just isn't where it needs to be yet."

National Guard and Reserve units are doing their parts in helping it get there.



# RESERVISTS



## SHOW BATTLEFIELD BRAVERY



by  
Richard K. Kolb

Citizen-soldiers of the National Guard and Reserves have demonstrated valor on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. Here is just a sampling of their courage under fire.

### **Sgt. Scott C. Montoya**

On April 8, 2003, during the Battle of Baghdad, Montoya was a scout-sniper with the Scout-Sniper Plt., F Co., 2nd Bn., 23rd Marines, 4th Marine Div. (Reserve). In Iraq, the 23rd was part of the 1st Marine Division.



Amidst a hail of gunfire and after first killing an insurgent, he dragged a wounded Iraqi civilian to safety. Performing a string of harrowing rescues, he returned to the embattled streets four more times to rescue Marines. In one case, the 5th degree black belt and Orange County (Calif.) deputy sheriff carried a Marine 500 yards fireman style.

Based in Encino, Calif., the unit Reserve center hosted the Jan. 23, 2005,

ceremony that presented Montoya's Navy Cross. Battalion commander Col. Geffery L. Cooper called him "a great example and advocate for all reservists."

Sheriff Michael S. Corona remarked, "He is a complete warrior. Whether as a Marine or a law enforcement figure, he is always putting the community or the country above his own personal safety."

### **Support Personnel on the Line**

*Courage is not confined to the combat arms. Though most awards for valor go to troops at the tip of the spear, especially the infantry, Iraq has placed support personnel in the midst of the fighting.*

*As of September 2006, only two Army Reserve soldiers, most of whom serve in logistical units, have been awarded the Silver Star. Here are their stories. (The Marine Forces Reserve failed to respond to repeated requests for Silver Star recipients.)*

## Pfc. Jeremy Church

April 9, 2004, saw truck driver Pfc. Jeremy Church caught in intense fire. His job was to haul fuel, or escort and protect civilians hauling fuel. But that day he far exceeded his job requirements.

While on an emergency fuel mission to Baghdad International Airport, the reservist from the 724th Transportation Company had his convoy ambushed by 200 members of Muqtada al Sadr's militia. The Humvee that he was driving contained platoon leader 1st Lt. Matthew Brown, who was severely wounded.

After saving Brown, he went back to the raging firefight to rescue those still pinned down. Under heavy fire, Church rendered aid to other wounded. Remaining behind, he killed several insurgents and had to be pulled out of the gun battle.

Yet he later helped the wounded civilian truck drivers to safety. Church is credited with saving five soldiers' lives and four civilians. The Army presented the Silver Star to Church on Feb. 27, 2005.



## Sgt. Jim Witkowski\*

A month short of his tour's end, Sgt. Jim Witkowski sacrificed his life for his fellow soldiers. A member of the 729th Transportation Company (based in Fresno, Calif.), he was manning the .50-caliber machine gun aboard Gun Truck 3 on Oct. 26, 2005.

About 100 soldiers were in the 23-vehicle convoy (including the 1173rd Transportation Company of the Virginia National Guard), which was transporting supplies from Camp Anaconda near Balad to FOB Susie outside of Kirkuk.

Living up to its deadly reputation, the Sunni Triangle erupted with roadside bomb explosions followed by all manner of withering fire. When a grenade landed in his turret, Witkowski smothered it with his body. He died instantly.

This selfless act prevented the convoy from becoming bogged down in the kill zone, which easily could have proved fatal. "He pretty much saved the entire convoy," Staff Sgt. Christine Froncak told Michelle Tan of the *Army Times*.

The 32-year-old Sunrise, Ariz., resident had lived up to the ideals that prompted him to enlist after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. As a unit member said, he was the "picture-perfect American hero."

### Earning Nation's Third-Highest Valor Award

*At least 17 Silver Stars have gone to National Guard soldiers and airmen. Yet only the three presented to Kentucky MPs Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein, Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester and Spc. Jason*



*Mike are fairly well-publicized. They and Arkansas National Guardsman 1st Lt. Michael McCarty are covered in the article beginning on page 12. At least three Air Reserve personnel have been awarded the Silver Star, all in one Iraq operation.*

## Sgt. Russell L. Collier\*

"Doc" Collier, as he was affectionately known, was doing what medics are trained to do when he was killed in action—attempting to save a life.

Collier, of Harrison, Ark., was attached to A Battery, 1st Bn., 103rd Field Artillery Regt. (Rhode Island National Guard). That battery deployed to Iraq as part of the 1st Bn., 206th FA Regt., 39th Infantry Brigade (Arkansas National Guard).

On Oct. 3, 2004, a patrol from Camp Taji, just north of Baghdad, was ambushed. Squad leader Staff Sgt. Christopher S. Potts of Tiverton, R.I., was wounded and pinned down. Giving his weapon to another soldier, Collier unhesitatingly ran to Potts. In the process of rendering aid, both men were killed.

"The circumstances of their deaths are legendary and stories from which heroes are born," said Lt. Col. Keith Klemmer, commander of the 1st Battalion.

"His unselfish actions under direct enemy fire led to his own mortal wounds," states the citation. Collier's Silver Star was posthumously presented on Jan. 12, 2005. He was 48.



## 1st Sgt. Kevin Remington

As a member of the 957th Multi-Role Bridge Co., 142nd Eng. Bn. (North Dakota National Guard) attached to Mississippi's 168th Eng. Grp., Remington certainly went well beyond the call of duty.

In July 2003 near Ar Ramadi, insurgents attacked his convoy, disabling one of the vehicles. Remington was not about to sit tight. As his citation reads: "His impeccable leadership inspired four soldiers in a gun truck to drive through an ambush kill zone four separate times to save their fellow comrades."

One of the rescued soldiers, Spc. Brandon Erickson, later said, "With his back to the enemy fire, he completely put my life in front of his own well being." Col. Gregg F. Martin, commander of the 130th Eng. Bde., called him "the hero of the 130th Engineer Brigade ... He is a leader of miraculous fortitude and courage."

Remington received the Silver Star on Jan. 25, 2004. He had earlier been awarded a Bronze Star and Mississippi Magnolia Cross for valor.

"It's an honor to be considered and receive the Silver Star," he said.



## Staff Sgt. Michael J. McMullen\*

Assigned to the 243rd Engineer Company (Maryland National Guard) out of Baltimore under the operational control of the 143rd Transportation Command, McMullen was serving as the convoy's aid man on Dec. 24, 2005.

Departing Camp Corregidor en route to FOB al Taqqam, the supply column of 20 trucks was on a "blackout drive"—headlights out and night goggles on—when one vehicle hit a device detonated by a 122mm artillery round in Ramadi. A coordinated barrage of gunfire followed.



Undeterred, the paramedic and firefighter by profession saved the life of a sergeant by moving him from the burning vehicle and protecting him from a second explosion. But in doing so, McMullen was hit with a 2-inch by 4-inch piece of shrapnel, destroying his L3 vertebra, and was terribly burned.

McMullen died of his wounds at Walter Reed Army Medical Center on Jan. 10, 2006, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He was posthumously promoted and awarded the Silver Star.

"We often use the word hero to describe personal acts that go beyond the call of duty," said Maj. Gen. Bruce Tuxill, adjutant general of the Maryland National Guard. "By all accounts, Sgt. McMullen lived up to that definition, giving his life while caring for and protecting his fellow soldiers."

## Tech. Sgt. Keary J. Miller

Kentucky's Air National Guard is unique in that it fields an elite air unit—the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron based in Louisville. Pararescueman Miller is one of the elite, as he proved in Afghanistan.

On March 2, 2002, atop Takhur Mountain, he was the Air Force search-and-rescue team leader assigned to a quick reaction force searching for SEALs evading capture. During the Battle of Robert's Ridge, his helicopter was hit by an RPG and forced to crash-land.



MICHAEL CLEVELAND / © THE COURIER-JOURNAL

In defending the chopper, his group lost four KIA and 5 WIA. Another pararescueman was killed later. Displaying multiple acts of extraordinary courage, Miller cared for the wounded while distributing ammunition. His actions led to the recovery of seven KIAs and helped save the lives of 10 gravely wounded Americans.

His Silver Star was awarded Nov. 1, 2003. "You're not so much concerned about yourself as you are buddies," said the modest Miller at the awards ceremony.

Miller had been a PJ (pararescueman) for 11 years. He was one of the few Americans to serve under fire in Bosnia. It was during the 1995 search for two downed French pilots.

## Spc. Gerrit Kobes

Kobes was a medic of HQ Co., 1st Bn., 161st Inf. Regt., 81st Brigade (Washington National Guard). But in Iraq he was temporarily reassigned to a California National Guard unit—B Co., 1st Bn., 160th Inf. Regt.—operating under the 1st Cavalry Division.

On Nov. 2, 2004, a convoy was ferrying Iraqi soldiers to Fallujah. His truck was in the middle of the 60-vehicle convoy. Suddenly, RPGs knocked out some of the trucks. Kobes ran through a hail of enemy fire to aid four wounded Iraqi national guardsmen. Exposing himself again to fire, he loaded the wounded.



Staff Sgt. John Todd assisted him, along with other members of Bravo Company. The 1st Cav's commander called Kobes "a tremendous individual and a great hero" when his Silver Star was presented on Feb. 5, 2005. Kobe's home is in Kettle Falls, Wash.

## Tech Sgt. Kevin Whalen

A member of the Air Force's elite Tactical Air Control Party, 116th Air Support Operations Squadron (Washington Air National Guard), Whalen earned his Silver Star in Afghanistan on July 19, 2003.



While attached to an Army Special Forces unit, the Taliban and al Qaeda ambushed him. He provided cover with a grenade launcher as others found safe positions. Though wounded, he then called in close air support.

The last to be medically evacuated, he controlled the air support until the very end of the firefight.

Whalen's unit is based at Camp Murray, Wash. He was presented the medal in December 2004.

## Sgt. Matthew Zedwick

A member of B Co., 2nd Bn., 162nd Inf. Regt., 41st Brigade Combat Team (Oregon National Guard), Zedwick was attached to the 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, 1st Cavalry Div., on June 13, 2004, when he was hit during a convoy operation.

Driving the third vehicle among four north of Camp Taji, Zedwick had his vehicle destroyed by a car bomb. In the process, the gunner was killed and commander severely wounded. Despite taking 13 pieces of shrapnel, Zedwick managed to save the commander.

Running back to the burning Humvee to rescue the gunner, Zedwick could only retrieve weapons and a radio before it exploded. He defended his position



against enemy fire until relieved.

Now a staff sergeant, Zedwick was selected as a model for an action hero in “America’s Army: Real Heroes,” a line of toy soldiers. He is now studying graphic design at Linn Benton Community College in Albany, Ore.

## Spc. Brian M. Sheetz

As a loader aboard an Abrams tank, Sheetz had a vital role in C Co., 1st Bn., 103rd Armor Regt., 2nd BCT, 28th Div. (Pennsylvania National Guard).

Based at Camp Habbaniyah, his unit patrolled Main Supply Route Michigan. Highway 10, nicknamed IED Alley, was a deadly thoroughfare, as Sheetz found out on Feb. 27, 2006. During an ambush, an enemy grenade landed inside his tank. Sheetz grabbed it and threw it out of the hatch. But it detonated, sending shrapnel into his face and hand.

This valorous action was instrumental in saving the lives of three fellow crew members. Besides his Silver Star, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania recognized the father of two children from Connellsville with a special resolution.



Ray



Taylor



Winsmann

## Col. Kenneth Ray, Lt. Col. Bruce R. Taylor and Maj. Jim Winsmann

Col. Kenneth Ray, Lt. Col. Bruce R. Taylor and Maj. Jim Winsmann earned their Silver Stars in Iraq on April 3, 2003. Pilots of the 711th Special Operations Squadron, 919th Operations Group (Air Force Reserve), they flew MC-130E Combat Talons during a highly sensitive mission over Saddam Hussein’s Thar Thar Palace.

While refueling special operations helicopters, the planes were targeted by three Iraqi missiles. Despite the danger, they kept refueling the choppers as the helicopters themselves released flares to sidetrack one missile that was not evaded.

The 919th Special Operations Wing was the first reserve outfit to earn the new Gallant Unit Citation—the unit equivalent of the Silver Star—for “extraordinary gallantry” in Afghanistan and Iraq.

## Lt. Col. Michael E. McLaughlin\*

Being a brigade effects (artillery fire) coordinator for the 2nd BCT, 28th Div. (Pennsylvania National Guard) in Iraq entailed working with locals in various capacities. One duty was helping recruit Iraqi police in Ar Ramadi.

McLaughlin did so with special skill from Dec. 4, 2005, until Jan 5, 2006. Interacting with potential recruits at a glass factory that latter day proved fatal. A suicide bomber infiltrated the crowd, detonating a belt of explosives. The carnage claimed a Marine and nearly 80 Iraqis.

Shrapnel struck McLaughlin in the head yet he refused medical attention. More concerned with others, he succumbed to his wounds. His Silver Star citation says he “displayed extreme personal courage, selfless service and dedication to duty.”

Ironically, the 44-year-old father of two daughters from Mercer had been fired from his civilian job in 2001 for fulfilling his military obligations in the National Guard.



## Spc. Robert Shane Pugh\*

Pugh, a medic with Headquarters Co., 1st Bn., 155th BCT (Mississippi National Guard) sacrificed his life so a fellow GI could live. On March 2, 2005, at Iskandariyah, Iraq, he was instructing others to administer first aid to a wounded soldier when a roadside bomb claimed his own life.

“Though he was injured himself,” said Maj. Gen. Harold Cross, the Mississippi Guard’s adjutant general, “another soldier lay wounded next to him. Shane directed a group of primarily engineers on what to do to stop that soldier’s bleeding enough to where he could be stabilized.”

Only recently married, the 25-year-old licensed paramedic from Meridian was widely respected. Pugh’s Silver Star was presented posthumously to his family at that town’s armory. “He was an example to other youth,” the Rev. Calvin Farmer said. “Shane Pugh did not die without purpose. Shane is a hero.”



## Additional Medal Recipients

Cpl. Todd Corbin (Sandusky, Ohio) was awarded the Navy Cross and Sgt. Jeff Schuller (Monroeville, Ohio) received the Silver Star for valor in Iraq. Both men were with the 25th Marines. Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens of the North Carolina National Guard also received the Silver Star. This information became available after our article was published.

Others also performed heroic deeds that will never be officially recognized.

*\*Awarded posthumously*

*Unless otherwise noted, all photos came from public sources.*

For the 3,500 Mississippi Guardsmen of the 155th Brigade Combat Team, the welcome home ceremony sponsored by VFW was a fitting tribute to their overseas accomplishments.



# Rousing Welcome Home for Mississippi Guard

Story by **Janie Blankenship**

PHOTOS BY JOE ELLIS

In June, 3,500 members of the Mississippi National Guard's 155th Brigade Combat Team were officially welcomed home following a year's deployment in Iraq. And VFW's Department of Mississippi was front and center.

Nearly 300 VFW and Ladies Auxiliary members served about 7,500 meals to the troops and their families after the ceremony was held at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson. Service officers were on hand to assist with questions and concerns.

Representatives from VFW National Headquarters also participated in the event, including Junior Vice Commander George Lisicki, who expressed the organization's gratitude for the families.

"I can't begin to describe the appreciation we feel for your service to your spouse's unit," Lisicki said in addressing the crowd. "The sacrifices you made and continue to make for our nation often go unacknowledged and underappreciated."

A special issue of *VFW* magazine devoted to the National Guard, as well as a reprint of the April *VFW* focusing on Iraq and Afghanistan war vets, were available to each Guardsman.

For Department Adjutant Johnnie Richard, it was "unbelievable" the way the veteran-volunteers sprung into action.

"This was definitely the highlight of

my time with VFW," Richard said. "It was a significant event because as long as there are Korean or Vietnam War veterans alive, we'll never allow anyone to come home the way we did."

WWII vet L.C. "Doc" Blanchard of Post 6731 in D'Iberville served as a rover of sorts after the ceremony. He said he walked around and visited with everyone and answered questions about VFW.

"In my 45 years with VFW, it was the best event I have been involved with," Blanchard said. "Everyone from the top brass to the families seemed so appreciative of what we were doing."

Indeed, Staff Sgt. Marvin Maxey thought it was all quite "impressive," and said he was proud to have his family there.

"It was such an honor to serve my country," Maxey said. "Then to come home to this wonderful ceremony was nice."

Since he got home last December (the majority of the 155th returned just prior to Christmas), Maxey said he is sticking close to home, close to his wife.

"I don't know if she thinks I'm overwhelming her, but I just want to be close to her," Maxey said with a laugh. "When you're away that long, you just want to be with family all the time."

Spc. Harry Corey hit the books when he came back from Iraq. He's studying electrical engineering at Mississippi

**Above:** VFW Mississippi Department Commander Donnie Verucchi presents a certificate to the family of Sgt. Travis Cooper who was among 28 soldiers killed while serving with the 155th BCT. Accepting the certificate are Cooper's grandmother Ollie Mason, son Tarian Cooper, 4 months, aunt Lavon Cooper and fiance Selethia Malone.

State University. He took time out to attend his unit's welcome home, though.

"I like the fact that I'm already a veteran at 20," said Corey, who joined the Guard right out of high school. "At our ceremony, I was touched by the service for my fallen brothers. It was good to give them their due recognition."

During its time in Iraq, the 155th lost 28 men, 16 of them Guardsmen from Mississippi. Sgt. Robert Shane Pugh, killed in action on March 2, 2005, posthumously received a Silver Star. A combat medic, Pugh told other soldiers how to care for the wounds of another GI, though Pugh lay dying, the result of a roadside bomb.

To honor Pugh and the others killed, the coliseum lights went out except for a lone spotlight that shone on a pair of tan army boots and helmet perched atop a rifle. The names of the dead were read.

Following the ceremony, VFW discreetly recognized the families of the deceased warriors with memorial commendations. They read, in part, the "sac-



The Mississippi National Guard's 155th Brigade nearly filled the coliseum at the Jackson County Fairgrounds in Jackson, Miss. VFW partnered with the 155th to welcome home the unit's 3,500 members who had spent a year in Iraq during 2005.



**Above:** VFW Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief George Lisicki addresses the 155th Brigade during its homecoming event. Below him were tributes and memorial commendations created by VFW for the 28 KIA—Guardsmen and regulars—sustained by the 155th in Iraq.

riفة will forever be remembered and honored by those who share the common bond of service under the flag.”

Noting that he didn't realize so many of his comrades were killed, Staff Sgt. James Baker said he liked the “remembrance” portion of the ceremony the most.

“It was good they were honored there,” said the married father of three. “I came close to joining them a couple of times.”

Having been in the Guard for 21 years, Baker was previously deployed to Bosnia, where he cleared minefields and worked with locals. In Iraq, he helped train Iraqi forces.

“When I was in Iraq, I missed my freedom the most,” he said. “I could go to the PX, but after 50 times, I could tell when a bottle of lotion had been sold because I had the place memorized.”

In his fifth year with the Guard, Sgt. Vincent Clay said he appreciated the magazines, but the memorial service was the most meaningful. He said that it was “so right.”

Clay, who also came home just before Christmas, said he's been spending time with his friends and family, especially his wife.

“I missed them more than anything

when I was in Iraq,” he said. “I got to call every three days or so, and I e-mailed my wife pretty much every day.”

### **Achievements & Awards**

The 155th is the largest unit of Mississippi National Guard soldiers to deploy to a combat zone since WWII. While they were in Iraq, they conducted more than 400 explosive ordnance disposal missions. They located and destroyed more than 6,000 small arms, 24 machine guns, 217 rocket-propelled grenades, 295 mortar tubes and 10,000 mortar rounds. Some 55 land mines were detected and 40 surface-to-air missiles were destroyed.

According to Maj. Gen. Harold Cross, Mississippi's adjutant general, a Marine commander recommended the 155th for a Presidential Unit Citation. Furthermore, individual medals awarded include 123 Purple Hearts, 328 Bronze Stars (eight of them for valor), 1,877 Combat Action Badges, 372 Combat Infantryman Badges, 115 Combat Medical Badges and one Silver Star.

“It's a tribute that the 155th was able to bring such a diverse group of soldiers together in such a short amount of time,” Jr. Vice Lisicki said. “And to accomplish such an important mission.” ★

# Mississippi Post Raises \$24,000 for Guard Vet Amputee

*This wounded vet says he's not disabled, 'just challenged.'*

by Janie Blankenship

When William Brooks isn't interning on Capitol Hill for Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.), he is buzzing the halls of Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., spreading hope to the wounded. Some might say he's come a long way in a short time.

A specialist with the Mississippi Army National Guard, Brooks was severely wounded on March 29, 2005, when a roadside bomb blew up the vehicle in which he was riding. At 23, Brooks, who was serving as a military policeman with the 155th Brigade Combat Team, lost both legs just below the knee.

The people of his hometown of Southaven, Miss., pulled together to support Brooks' parents, Carolyn and Larry, and older brother, John. One of Carolyn's former students has a brother stationed at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, and he made a special trip to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center to report on Brooks' condition.

The family was reunited on April 5 at Walter Reed. "Seeing him for the first time was the second-most difficult time for us, the first being not knowing of his condition," Carolyn said.

It only got worse when Carolyn was the one who had to make her son realize that the reason he couldn't feel his legs was because they were gone.

"Saying that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," she said. "But we've been blessed because the doctors told us he should have died. God has a greater purpose for William's life because he isn't supposed to be with us [because by all odds he should not have survived]."

To show their thanks and appreciation for Brooks' sacrifice, members of Post 10567 in Southaven held a benefit on July 2. Breakfast and dinner were served, and



MICHAEL SPIKES / DESOTO APPEAL

**Left:** VFW well-wishers greet Iraq vet William Brooks at Post 10567 in Southaven, Miss. A VFW-sponsored benefit garnered more than \$24,000 for Brooks, who lost his legs in an explosion in Iraq.

**Below:** Brooks stands for the first time after getting his second prosthetic leg on Aug. 2, just before meeting with President Bush at the White House. The Iraq vet is interning on Capitol Hill while he continues physical therapy at Walter Reed.

**"I'm not disabled, I'm just challenged. If God would grow my legs back, I'd be on the first plane to Iraq."**

— William Brooks

some 300 barbecued meat cuts were sold for \$25 each. Later that day, a silent auction featured a diamond ring that sold for \$2,300. The Post raised more than \$24,000 for Brooks, who is now a life member of the Post. The wounded vet said he plans to use the money to purchase a specially equipped vehicle to get him to and from Mississippi State University. He needs only three semesters of classes to complete his degree in political science.

Johnny Raney, former Department of Mississippi commander, said he was impressed by the way the community turned out in support.

"Other Posts throughout the state donated, too," Raney noted. "We have



PHOTO COURTESY CAROLYN BROOKS

many young members in our Post, and we need them to know they can count on us." (The Post has about 20 members who served in campaigns during the '90s up through those of today.)

Brooks was fitted for his prosthetic legs and continues his physical therapy at Walter Reed.

"I carry with me a picture of him with his new legs," Carolyn said. "It's my favorite picture. It was taken on Aug. 2, the day he got his right leg, and

we went to the White House to meet President Bush."

She added that once in a while she still gets choked up thinking about all that her son has been through. Recently, she found a baby photo of him and said it really got to her.

But rest assured, Brooks doesn't want sympathy.

"I'm not disabled, I'm just challenged," said Brooks, who was recently promoted to the rank of sergeant. "If God would grow my legs back, I'd be on the first plane back to Iraq." ✪

# Reservists in Action

America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have seen the largest overseas deployment of National Guardsmen and reservists since the Korean War. Here is a rundown on their major combat actions in each theater.

## Afghanistan War

### 2001

**Oct 19** "Hit Night": 919th Special Operations Wing (Air Force Reserve) elements are the first fixed-wing planes to penetrate Afghanistan's airspace, performing vital refueling missions.

### 2004

**Jan 29** 4 Army reservists are among the 8 soldiers killed near Ghazni in a weapons cache explosion.

### 2005

**Mar 26** 4 U.S. soldiers from the Indiana National Guard's HQ Co., 76th Inf. Bde. (Separate) are KIA when their vehicle strikes a land mine in Kabul.

**Apr 6** 2 National Guardsmen and 1 Army reservist are among the 14 soldiers killed in a CH-47 Chinook helicopter crash due to weather in Ghazni.

**Sep 25** 5 crewmen—4 from the Nevada National Guard's D Co., 113th Avn. Regt.—die when their CH-47 Chinook helicopter is shot down near the Deh Chopan District.

### 2006

**Mar 12** 4 Army reservists of A & HQ Cos., 391st Eng. Bn. (N.C.) are KIA by a roadside bomb near Asadabad.

**Jun 6** 2 U.S. soldiers of the 1st Bn., 188th Air Defense Artillery (North Dakota ARNG) are KIA by mines in Khogyani.

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## Iraq War

### 2003

**Nov 2** 3 members of the Illinois National Guard's 106th Aviation Battalion are among the 13 soldiers KIA when their CH-47 helicopter is shot down by an SA-7 missile near Fallujah.

### 2004

**Apr 9** A convoy of the 724th Transportation Company (Illinois, Reserve) is attacked outside Balad, killing 8 and wounding 17 Americans: 2 soldiers and 6 civilian truck drivers are killed. Sgt. Keith M. Maupin is captured, the only GI classified as alive and unaccounted for in Iraq.

**Apr 24** Mortar rounds kill 4 soldiers of the HQ Co., 39th Support Bn., 39th BCT (Arkansas ARNG) at their camp in Taji.

**May 2** Mortar attack near Ramadi kills 5 Reserve Seabees of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 14.

**Jun 4** Roadside bombs and RPGs kill 5 soldiers: 3 of the 2nd Bn., 162nd IR, 41st Bde. (Oregon ARNG) and 2 of 3rd Bn., 112th FA (New Jersey ARNG) in Baghdad.

**Jun 24** **Battle of Baqubah.** A Co., 1st Bn., 120th IR, 30th Separate Bde. (North Carolina ARNG) participates in a pitched 8-hour battle on city streets, killing 60 of the enemy. The 30th: 2 KIA, 6 WIA.

**Nov 20** **Battle at the Adhamiyah Police Station.** 3rd Plt. (26 men), C Co., 3rd Bn., 153rd Inf. Regt. (Arkansas ARNG) engages 75 insurgents at a Baghdad police post, killing at least 30. Platoon leader earns Silver Star.

### 2005

**Jan 6** Roadside bomb in Baghdad kills 7 GIs—1 of the 69th IR (New York ARNG) and 6 from C Co., 2nd Bn., 156th IR, 256th BCT (Louisiana ARNG).

**Feb 21** Roadside bomb kills 3 soldiers of C Co., 1st Bn., 151st FA (Minnesota ARNG) in Baghdad.

**Mar 20** **Battle of Salman Pak.** A 10-person squad of the 617th MP Co. (Kentucky ARNG) kills 27 enemy in a 25-minute firefight after their convoy is ambushed.

**May 11** Roadside bomb kills 4 Marines and wounds 10 of the 1st Plt., L Co., 3rd Bn., 25th Regt., 4th MD (MCR) in Haban.

**May 23** Roadside bomb in Haswa kills 4 soldiers of C Co., 1st Bn., 155th IR (Mississippi ARNG).

**Jun 9** Roadside bomb in Haqlaniya kills 5 Marines—1 of the 1st Tank Bn., 1 of 4th Tank Bn. and 3 from the 3rd Bn., 25th Marines, 4th MD (MCR, Ohio).

**Jul 24** Roadside bomb in Baghdad kills 4 soldiers of A Co., 2nd Bn., 121st IR, 48th BCT (Georgia ARNG).

**Jul 30** Roadside bomb in Baghdad kills 4 soldiers of A Co., 2nd Bn., 121st IR, 48th BCT (Georgia ARNG).

**Aug 1** 6 snipers of H&S Co., 3rd Bn., 25th Marines, 4th MD (MCR, Brook Park, Ohio) are KIA in a firefight in Haditha.

**Aug 3** **Largest Single KIA Loss.** Roadside bomb hits an APC in Haditha, killing 14 Marines—9 from 1st Sqd., 3rd Plt., L Co., 3rd Bn., 25th Marines, 4th MD (MCR, Columbus, Ohio) alone.

**Aug 3** Suicide bomber in Baghdad kills 3 soldiers of the 648th Eng. Bn., 48th BCT (Georgia ARNG).

**Aug 9** Mine and small arms in Baji kill 4 soldiers of the 2nd Plt., A Co., 1st Bn., 111th IR, 56th Bde., 28th ID (Pennsylvania ARNG).

**Aug 13** 3rd Sqdn., 278th BCT (Tenn.) sustains 3 KIA in a firefight in Tuz.

**Sep 15** 3rd Plt., A Co., 103rd Armd. Regt. (Pennsylvania ARNG) fights off a platoon-sized enemy element at Battle Position 4 in the Sufa district of Ramadi.

**Sep 19** Roadside bomb in Ramadi kills 4 soldiers—1 of the 42nd ID (New York ARNG) and 3 of the 28th ID (Pennsylvania ARNG).

**Sep 28** Roadside bomb/ambush near Ramadi kills 5 soldiers of C Co., 1st Bn., 109th IR, 55th Bde., 28th ID (Pennsylvania ARNG).

**Sep 29** 3rd Platoon (same as above) withstands an assault by a company equivalent of insurgents at Entry Control Point 5 in Ramadi. Only 2 Americans are WIA. The platoon reportedly kills 100 of the enemy in the two above-mentioned actions.

### 2006

**Jan 7** 4 members of B Co., 1st Bn., 207th Avn. Regt. (Alaska ARNG) are among 8 soldiers who die when their UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter accidentally crashes near Tall Afar.

**Aug 18** 1st BCT, 34th Infantry Division (Minnesota National Guard) is the only Guard BCT in Iraq.

As a member of the National Guard or Reserves, your benefits differ when it comes to education and employment. But changes are improving opportunities in both areas.

# VA Benefits Guard & Reserves

by Richard K. Kolb

If you were federally activated by the President under *Title 10* and served on active duty, you are entitled to the same VA benefits as a full-time active-duty service member. This covers, of course, all National Guard Iraq and Afghanistan vets.

While care for reservist wounded and public recognition of their service is now generally equal to that of full-time service personnel, education and employment advantages are another matter.

## Benefits Advisors on the Job

To expedite information to Guardsmen returning from overseas deployments, VA in conjunction with the National Guard Bureau has created new positions called state benefits advisors (SBAs). They intend to guarantee a seamless transition by providing advice on various VA benefits and services.

Stationed in 54 states and territories, SBAs act as go-betweens among state VA offices, veterans service organizations, the VA central office and community groups. As veterans themselves, they will be valuable assets during mobilization and demobilization periods.

## Making the GI Bill Equal

A prime VA benefit for many reservists is the Reserve Montgomery GI Bill (RMGIB). A provision of the *National Defense Authorization Act of 2005* called the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (or Chapter 1607) granted an increase in the monthly stipend to reservists depending on length of acti-

vation. But the enhanced payment must be applied for because it is not automatically offered.

To be eligible, a Guardsman must have been activated after Sept. 11, 2001, and served on active duty for at least 90 consecutive days. Also, he or she has to be on current drill status. A Guard member is entitled to 36 monthly GI Bill payments.

Legislative efforts are under way to grant the full benefit of the MGIB to Guard and Reserve vets. Currently, Guard members must forfeit unused benefits after their commitment is up. A proposed Total Force GI Bill would give reserve benefits portability and raise the basic reserve benefit to equal 50% of the value of the active duty MGIB (vs. 29% today) for all reservists.

Under the terms of proposed *H.R. 5326*, those who served on active duty for nine consecutive months in one year or 18 months over a two-year period would be fully qualified for the total package.

The *Partnership for Veterans Education*, of which VFW is a member, also is fighting for a benefit commensurate with the military service performed. Its proposal calls for a three-tiered structure proportional to the active-duty rate of GI Bill payments. The *Partnership* represents more than 50 groups with an interest in this issue. VFW has long advocated a GI Bill for the 21st century.

At press time, the only legislative action in the works affecting the 2007 budget was a Senate amendment to the



Mathew Banford and roommate Joe Poch search for textbooks at the University of Iowa bookstore on Poch's first day of classes. Both men served with Iowa National Guard's 224th Engineer Battalion in Iraq and are now attending classes on the Montgomery GI Bill.

2007 defense authorization bill that would allow some members of the Selected Reserve to use their GI Bill benefits up to 10 years after discharge.

Advocates say the best overall solution is to place reserve GI Bill benefits, now being paid by the Defense Department, under VA. Currently, reservists are considered veterans for every VA benefit except education payments.

## Home Loan Guaranty Increasing

Besides education, housing is another key concern. To be eligible for a VA home loan guaranty, a reservist is required to have served honorably on active duty for six months. Between 1999 and 2003, according to a VA study, National Guard and Reserve members held only 3.2% of home loan guaran-



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of 1994 now states six regulations clearly.

Of particular importance is the fact that wounded Guardsmen are entitled to be re-employed in the same position they would have reached, and employers must accommodate their disabilities.

As Labor Secretary Elaine Chao so aptly put it, “These brave men and women should not have to worry about their civilian jobs and benefits when they are on the front lines.”

### State Programs Fill the Gaps

A variety of state offerings supplement federal benefits. For instance, the Vet Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., developed readjustment and reintegration retreats for Colorado National Guard vets.

The Minnesota National Guard’s unique “Reintegration: Beyond Reunion” provides counseling and training for college administrators, informing them about VA benefits and the needs of vets on campus.

Its purpose, says Maj. John Morris, program founder and deputy chaplain for the Minnesota Army National Guard, is to make productive citizens. But this requires the help of society as a whole. “Since there are so few of us fighting the war, it’s easy for the rest of us to try,” he said.

New Hampshire and Maryland offer transition assistance courses tailored to reservists in the hometowns of their units. New Hampshire’s “Reunion and Reentry” program, created in 2004, is a model for others states, including neighboring Massachusetts and New Jersey.

Besides informal briefings, it mandates individual psychological counseling as part of the three-day process. Massachusetts has a second compulsory screening after 120 days of returning home.

New Jersey developed a similar “reconstitution” program in 2003 for its National Guard veterans. It operates a 24-hour hotline and provides funding for counseling from one of 20 private counselors contracted by the state on a prorated service basis.

Doubling the amount it allocates for mental health care to \$800,000 in 2006, New Jersey plans to supplement federal VA benefits with another \$200,000 in 2007. ★

tees. However, with the advent of the Iraq War, that percentage is sure to grow.

For those who can take advantage of it, there is good news. In 2005, *P.L. 108-454* raised the maximum home loan guaranty price from \$240,000 to 25% of the Freddie Mac conforming loan limit for a single-family residence. That figure is adjusted on January 1 of each year. For 2006, the amount is \$417,000.

### Free Legal Assistance Offered

The American Bar Association maintains a Standing Committee on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel. Part of that committee’s efforts is an ongoing project called *Operation Enduring LAMP*.

A consortium of state and local bar associations, it recruits volunteer attorneys—including training at facilities in some cases—to help military legal providers with civil law matters. This covers issues such as re-employment rights and survivors benefits for reservists.

But the ABA stresses that a reservist should first contact existing military legal

representatives. Then, if necessary, a referral will be made to a local bar volunteer.

### Veterans Preference Now Applies to You

Things are improving in the job market, too. Two provisions of the *2006 Defense Authorization Act* broaden the definition of a veteran and clarify eligibility for preference in hiring veterans for federal civilian jobs (that is, granting points on civil service examinations).

A reservist must have served on active duty for more than 180 consecutive days after Sept. 11, 2001, regardless of location. The language now stipulates that one be only “discharged or released from active-duty service” as opposed to being “separated from the armed forces.”

(In January, the Office of Personnel Management added Afghanistan and Iraq Campaign Medal recipients to the vet preference entitlement list.)

In the same employment vein, reservist job rights also were clarified earlier this year. *The Uniformed Services Employment & Reemployment Rights Act*

# Army National Guard

## Brigade Combat Teams Proudly Served in Iraq

A total of 13 full National Guard brigade combat teams rotated through Iraq. In addition, many smaller citizen-soldier units have seen service there. At their peak in March 2005, 50,285 Guardsmen were stationed in the war zone. The patches displayed below symbolically represent the Army National Guard in combat in Iraq.

**Note:** All units listed are infantry unless otherwise designated: Armored—30th, 81st, 155th; Cavalry—116th, 278th.

42nd Infantry Division (New York)  
The only National Guard division since the Korean War fully committed (4,000 personnel) to a war zone was the 42nd.

*Other BCT elements that have served in Iraq include those of the 26th, 27th, 33rd, 37th, 40th, 50th, 58th, 86th, 92nd, 116th Inf., 149th, 207th, 218th, as well as the 35th Div. (Kan.).*

256th (Louisiana)

278th (Tennessee)

2nd, 55th, 56th BCTs/28th (Pennsylvania)

29th (Hawaii)

30th (North Carolina)

32nd (Wisconsin)

155th (Mississippi)

116th (Idaho)

81st (Washington)

76th\* (Indiana)

53rd\* (Florida)

48th (Georgia)

45th\* (Oklahoma)

41st\* (Oregon)

39th (Arkansas)

1st BCT/34th (Minnesota)

56th BCT/36th (Texas)

*Did not deploy as a BCT.*

\* Deployed to Afghanistan as a BCT, but sent only selected units to Iraq.



SGT. CHRIS A. DURNEY, 119TH MOBILE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DETACHMENT / U.S. ARMY

# Honoring the Sacrifices:

## *Arkansas' National Guard Memorial*



Lt. Col. Anita Long of the Arkansas Army National Guard takes time to read some of the 43 plaques on the Arkansas National Guard Killed in Action Memorial following the dedication of 28 new plaques May 7, 2006, that honor Guard members killed in wars past.

The monument is located on Camp Joseph T. Robinson in North Little Rock, and was initially dedicated on

Sept. 10, 2005, in honor of the 15 Arkansas Guard members killed in action while serving with the 39th Brigade Combat Team in Iraq.

Twenty of the newly placed plaques honor those killed in the war with Mexico (1846-48), along with three from WWII and four from the Korean War. A single plaque honors all soldiers lost during the Civil War.

# Wisconsin and Mississippi Guard Vets Forming New VFW Posts

*After returning from duty in Iraq, National Guard members from Wisconsin and Mississippi established new Posts in their communities in 2005.*

With the help of VFW members, Iraq War vets established two VFW “unit” Posts in Wisconsin and Mississippi last year. Joining VFW together was a big selling point for the new Post members from Wisconsin, all of whom served in the same National Guard unit in Iraq.

“They were attracted by the fact that the Post is made up of all unit members and they’re all young,” said Post 12036 Commander Staff Sgt. Stephen Pepper, a full-time member of the Wisconsin National Guard’s 32nd MP Company. “They also like that there are many female members.”

Post 12036 in Pewaukee, Wis., is named for Michelle Witmer, a member of Pepper’s squad killed in an ambush in April 2004 in Iraq. Witmer was the Guard’s first female GI killed in combat.

The 32nd MP Company was based in Baghdad’s Green Zone from June 2003 through July 2004, patrolling the city and helping train Iraqi police.

Pepper says all Post members are 40 and younger, with the average age about 27. They hold their Post meetings in conjunction with their monthly Guard drill weekends. It’s crucial, he says, that VFW recruit young vets.

“They can help get the word out,” Pepper said. “They’re energetic. They don’t want to sit through long, redundant meetings. When we have something to say, we say it and then get it done.”

Pepper received help in creating the Post from former Wisconsin Department Commander Bill Backes and VFW members Troy Tuschel, Tom Tradewell, Kevin Kavnough, Tom Lemmer and John Miller. The Department built a relationship with the 32nd while it was deployed, sending *Operation Uplink* phone cards and two satellite phones.

After the unit returned, Backes and his crew met with the Guard members at one of their weekend drills. He says the



Staff Sgt. Stephen Pepper (standing, second from right) and other members of 1st Squad, 2nd Plt., 32nd MP Co., Wisconsin National Guard, form up near the Tigris River in Iraq in September 2003. All but one of the soldiers are members of VFW Post 12036 in Pewaukee, Wis.

face-to-face interaction was important.

“We went out and talked to the new vets and let them know that we were there for them and their families when they were gone,” said Backes, a Vietnam vet, “and we are here for them now.”

In Calhoun City, Miss., members of B Co., 223rd Eng. Bn., Mississippi National Guard, formed Post 12032 in April 2005. The Post currently tallies 37 members.

Post Commander James Coggins, Jr., says the average age of Post members is around 40, and they are impressed with VFW’s veterans advocacy.

“We believe VFW will continue to have a strong voice and an even stronger impact on the future treatment and legislation of all things connected to veterans,” Coggins said.

Based at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Warhorse, some 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, from April 2003 to April 2004, Coggins’ unit built tents, showers and roads at various FOBs in Iraq.

Like the Post in Wisconsin, Post 12032 also received help from a past Department commander. Johnny J. Raney, Mississippi’s Department commander in 2004-05, says state leaders should go slow in the beginning and make sure all members are eligible.

“Help organize them, but don’t rush these guys,” Raney said. “They take their

eligibility very seriously and don’t want it cheapened.”

He adds it’s critical VFW recruiters meet face-to-face with local Guard commanders.

“Go to the colonel, and then talk to the top sergeant,” Raney said. “If you can sell the top sergeant on the idea, then you’ll sell the whole unit.”

Coggins fondly remembers VFW members meeting him at the Atlanta airport when he came home for his two-week leave. VFW, he says, teaches young vets that they have the same privileges, persuasion and pride that older vets enjoy. Coggins, too, believes young vets need to be VFW members.

“They can help preserve this wonderful institution for all future veterans of foreign wars,” he said.

**For more information on how to join VFW contact:**