



NEWS YOU CAN USE

Weekly News for National Guard Families

Index of Articles

Note: Topics below are now bookmarked! Click on the underlined topic below to link to the pages on that topic.

READINESS

Hazardous Duty; Fire Academy Hosts Reserve Soldiers For Haz-Mat Training
Training The 48th: Duty's Dry Run. In Fort Irwin, Calif., Role-Players Provoke Real Emotions In Iraq-bound Guardsmen.

BENEFITS

Improved Benefits On The Way
Salazar Backs Expanding Veterans' Aid
Disabled Vets Give Thumbs Up to New VA Career Program

GUARD IN IRAQ

Marne, Rainbow Soldiers Receive Combat Patch

HEALTH ISSUES

Military Confronts Combat Stress at Front Lines

GENERAL

Walter Reed War Wounded Cheer D.C.'s New Baseball Team's Win
Staying Connected Over Many Miles Teen Builds Web Site Honoring Father Deployed To Iraq

Websites:

National Guard Family Program Online Communities for families and youth:

<http://www.guardfamily.org/>

<http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org/>

TRICARE website for information on health benefits

<http://www.tricare.osd.mil/>

Civilian Employment Information (CEI) Program Registration for Army and Air National Guard, Air Force, and Coast Guard Reserve

<https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/esgr/index.jsp> (Note to those viewing this page in Word or PDF format: You may have to copy this address and paste it into your browser's address window.)

Cumulative roster of all National Guard and Reserve who are currently on active duty

<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2004/d20040331ngr1.pdf>

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) contains links and information about schooling, distance education, scholarships, and organizations devoted to the military family

<http://www.militarychild.org/index.cfm>

Militarystudent.org is a website that helps military children with transition and deployment issues. It has some great features for kids, parents, special needs families, school educators, and more—even safe chat rooms for kids.

<http://www.militarystudent.org>

Disabled Soldiers Initiative (DS3)

This website provides information on the new DS3 program. Through DS3, the Army provides its most severely disabled Soldiers and their families with a system of advocacy and follow-up.

<http://www.armyds3.org>

Have an article, announcement, or website that you'd like to share with the National Guard Family Program Community? Send your suggestions in an e-mail to Michelle.Bohlen@ngb.af.mil.

Hazardous Duty; Fire Academy Hosts Reserve Soldiers For Haz-Mat Training

Sentinel

15 April 2005

Frank J. Jost ,Sentinel reporter

LEWISTOWN — As thousands of American service members continue to be actively engaged overseas in the global war on terrorism, the issue of homeland security remains a key concern for both the military and civilian emergency response agencies across the nation.

Working to address that concern, those two forces came together Thursday for a joint training exercise in Lewistown. About 30 soldiers from the U.S. Army Reserve participated in hazardous material certification training at the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy on West Fourth Street.

“These people come to us with a baseline knowledge of chemical warfare components. The intention is to for them to seamlessly integrate with civilian emergency agencies,” said State Fire Commissioner Ed Mann.

Mann said the fire academy has conducted hazardous material certification for the Army Reserve since the fall of 2000. This group of soldiers, mostly from units located in the southern United States, is participating in a two-week training course at the academy.

“The purpose is to use soldiers from the **National Guard** and the Reserve to continue supporting the homeland security mission,” said 1st Lt. Jose Espinosa of the 329th Chemical Company from Orlando, Fla.

“This training will enable us to work side by side with civilian emergency responders in the United States, in the event of a terrorist or WMD attack,” Espinosa said.

In addition to the 329th, soldiers in the class include members of the 349th Chemical Company of Seattle, Wash.; the 366th Chemical Company of Fort Stewart, Ga.; the 371st Chemical Company of Greenwood, S.C.; and the 490th Headquarters Command of Fort McClellan, Ala.

Rita Wessel, curriculum specialist for the academy, explained the nature of the soldiers’ training.

“They’re being certified to the national standard of hazardous material technicians. They’re being trained to deal with highly lethal chemicals and hazards to the environment,” Wessel said.

The course combines classroom learning with hands-on training, Wessel said.

“What they’re learning is a very aggressive form of emergency intervention,” she said.

The soldiers strapped on air tanks and chemical protection suits as they prepared for their

afternoon training exercise. The instructors had designed a scenario to test the soldiers' abilities in responding to a hazardous material emergency.

Several instructors from the academy circulated among the soldiers, checking the equipment and reminding them to drink lots of water. On a warm spring day just wearing the equipment, let alone responding to an emergency, can raise the body's temperature significantly.

"We try to make it as close to reality as possible in the scenarios," instructor Tim Schreffler said. "In a real-life situation, communication and control need to be perfect."

The scenario involved a railroad tanker car carrying more than 800 gallons of simulated chlorosulfonic acid, a corrosive liquid which chemically reacts when it encounters moisture, Schreffler said. A stream of smoke and liquid leaked from beneath the tanker car, forming a sinister looking green puddle on the ground.

The soldiers were briefed on the situation but were not told what type of hazardous material was present. Part of the exercise required the soldiers to identify the nature of the hazardous material involved.

A two-man recon team approached the tanker first, to gather information and attempt to identify the nature of the hazardous substance. The only clue on the tanker car was a placard which read 'corrosive.'

The recon team used several devices and other means to obtain a preliminary identification of the green liquid. Afterward, the team members proceeded to an area set up by the decontamination team, where they were washed and scrubbed to remove potential contaminants from their suits and equipment.

The recon team members then reported their findings, which indicated a broken valve cover under the tanker was the source of the leak. Their superiors analyzed the information and proceeded to formulate a plan to contain the leak.

After the plan was made, a four-man entry team moved into action. The members brought a large, rubber stopper to replace the valve cover and stop the leak. However, they first had to remove an hydraulic jack and several blocks of wood which were holding the broken valve cover in place.

Once the jack was removed, green, foamy liquid spilled from the tanker, splashing the soldiers' protective suits and spreading across the ground rapidly. The entry team worked quickly to insert the rubber stopper and contain the leak, limiting the potential damage to the environment.

The entry team also was decontaminated once the leak was stopped. The entire exercise lasted for more than an hour.

"I've seen real-life situations last 18 hours or more. You have to work to protect the team as well as the community and the environment," Schreffler said.

The soldiers said they were pleased with the intensity and realism of the training provided by the Fire Academy.

"This is top-notch training here, very professional. I've learned more in two weeks than I

thought I ever would,” said Sgt. Patrick Childs of the 329th. “We’re very impressed.”

Pfc. Travis Gay of the 349th agreed. “It’s excellent training! The instructors were informative and really knew how to teach us to handle this type of situation,” Gay said.

“It’s realistic. You can’t train effectively without having realism in the exercise,” said Staff Sgt. Wally Ebbert of the 329th.

Spc. Franklin Smith of the 371st was also impressed. “It gave me a different perspective to see it from the firefighters’ side,” he said.

Fred Hunsinger, resident staff instructor and program manager for the fire academy, had nothing but praise for his students.

“This class is made up of top-end people from the military. These soldiers are well disciplined and in good physical condition,” Hunsinger said. “They’ve absorbed an awful lot of information and training in just two weeks.”

“We’re proud to serve our country by helping to bring these guys up to speed. We’re proud that the Army chose us to train them,” Hunsinger said.

Training The 48th: Duty's Dry Run. In Fort Irwin, Calif., Role-Players Provoke Real Emotions In Iraq-bound Guardsmen.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

April 18, 2005

By Moni Basu and Dave Hirschman

Fort Irwin, Calif. -- Lt. Col. Don Beard's frustration showed a few minutes into a tense meeting with the city council of the make-believe Iraqi village of Al Jaff.

"You've got plenty of demands," the Georgia Army **National Guard** soldier from Atlanta said through an interpreter. "I hear you asking for all kinds of things. But cooperation's got to be a two-way street."

A day earlier, soldiers from Beard's artillery regiment had come to Al Jaff, a trash-strewn, impoverished-looking "town" on this vast desert training base, to search for hidden weapons.

A routine mission quickly turned violent, and two suspected Iraqi insurgents died in simulated combat. In addition, eight civilians received wounds from mock gunfire, and a school was badly damaged.

Beard, 43, a full-time Guard employee with 23 years of military service, had returned to meet town leaders and to establish a relationship that would allow the American military and Iraqi civilians to work more closely.

Such high-stakes encounters between soldiers from the Georgia Guard's 48th Brigade Combat Team and Iraqi-American role players are a key part of the unit's preparation for a yearlong deployment to Iraq scheduled to begin next month.

"A few more days like yesterday, and you'll have more enemies here than friends," the Iraqi playing Al Jaff's mayor told Beard. The mayor asked that his name not be used because he still has family members in Iraq and fears for their safety if it is learned he is working with the American military.

"They do have a price on their heads. They can be seen as traitors," said John Duffey of Locust Grove, whose firm, JMDS, provides interpreters and role-players for war games at various military bases.

Dose of reality

While JMDS did not provide any role players for the Fort Irwin exercises, Duffey said the Iraqi expatriates help acquaint American soldiers with customs and culture. They also lend realism to the scenarios that makes even experienced soldiers sweat.

The role players follow rehearsed scripts and know how to push soldiers to the breaking point, much as they will be pushed in Iraq.

"Get out, America!" the role-players shout at the Georgia soldiers.

They stand nose to nose with the Americans and make throat-slitting gestures.

Sometimes they hoist posters of Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden to let the soldiers know their sympathies.

"That stuff scared me," said Spc. Faith Anderson of the Dublin-based 148th Support Battalion. "I felt like it was all so real. They managed to get us really angry. It's the way they talk to us. They push us. They hit us. They tell us they want to chop off our heads."

Spc. Amara Sackor of Boyds, Md., a sophomore studying electrical engineering at Montgomery College near his home, said it's easy to forget the scenarios are make-believe.

"Once it gets going, your adrenaline is pumping, and you're in full combat mode," said Sackor, a member of a Maryland Army National Guard infantry unit assigned to the 48th for the Iraq mission.

Sgt. Richard Socia, 34, of Rincon said the role players are successful at psychologically tormenting the soldiers.

"Any time you stand up front of someone's face and scream, you get to them," said Socia, a middle school teacher back home. "For some of the younger ones, it's bad."

For Beard's 118th Field Artillery Regiment, knowing how to interact with Iraqis will be just as important as knowing how to fire the unit's howitzers.

Uneasy negotiation

Al Jaff is battle-scarred. Shipping containers in drab desert hues resemble the concrete, flat-roofed houses common in Iraq. Bombed-out shells of cars litter the streets. Anti-American graffiti defaces the walls of buildings. Improvised explosive devices hide under guard rails and on the road shoulders.

When Beard and his soldiers returned to Al Jaff to meet with the city council, the soldiers were nervous.

During the meeting, Beard offered jobs and construction assistance, but demanded citizens identify and help fight insurgents.

Several town leaders thanked Beard but said the fight the previous day would cause lasting bitterness and undercut American reconstruction efforts unless the soldiers started behaving differently.

Beard offered to put up a tent for a temporary school while American soldiers repaired the old school. The tent was unacceptable to the Iraqis, though. They asked indignantly whether Beard would be satisfied sending his own children to a tent school.

Beard insisted that the Iraqis do more to identify insurgents, but the leaders resisted.

"It seems to you that the bad people come from us," a religious leader sitting across the table from Beard said. "They come from outside. People come to my mosque, and under Islam, even if I haven't seen them before, I don't have legal authority to take issue with them."

Beard made several proposals to repair damaged buildings, hire additional Iraqi police and put people to work. But none was immediately accepted.

"I offered a tent for a school, but you didn't accept my idea for a tent," he said, his voice rising. "You don't accept another building that could be used for a school. It was half your fault and half my fault that the old school got blown up. You offer me no solutions. You only show anger that the school got blown up. Being angry won't help."

A bicycle shop owner was incredulous.

"A couple of my guys got killed yesterday," he said, "and you ask me not to be angry?"

The two sides went back and forth for about an hour until Beard issued an ultimatum.

"We're not going to provide anything until we see some cooperation. That's got to be the first step," he said.

Sensing the impasse, the town's religious leader offered some advice to Beard and his soldiers.

"Enter our town as if we were your friends," he said. "That will decrease casualties for you and for us. Use your mentality. When you enter in a negative mentality, we both lose."

To conclude the meeting on a positive note, Beard told the council members: "Every day we study your culture. It's never our intention to insult any of you. We want to be your friends. We have the utmost respect for your town. As we work together, every day will get better."

But afterward, Beard remained as wary of the Iraqis as they were of him.

"The mayor is kind of hard to read," he said. "We have him listed as a neutral, but he tries to be intimidating and overbearing. I think he just wants to use us."

Spc. Stephen Engelman of the Maryland Army National Guard, a sophomore political science major at Hagerstown Community College, said the role players resist American orders, pretend not to understand English and generally seem hostile.

"They give us a lot of lip, a lot of trouble, and that's probably what we should expect when we get to Iraq," said Engelman, 20, of Smithsburg, Md. "I've heard that over there, people are generally more supportive of us and what we're trying to do. But I don't know. Maybe they're acting, too."

BENEFITS

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Improved Benefits On The Way

Biloxi Sun Herald

April 11, 2005

WASHINGTON - Three weeks before the TRICARE Reserve Select program begins, a key senator predicts Congress this year will embrace his plan to offer even better health care benefits to drilling Reserve and **National Guard** members.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., new chairman of the Senate Armed Services' subcommittee on military personnel, described as "excellent" the prospect of opening TRICARE Standard, the military's traditional fee-for-service health insurance, to any drilling reservist and family, and with none of the onerous strings attached under TRICARE Reserve Select.

"I have 70 senators behind me," Graham said Tuesday, moments after chairing his first personnel subcommittee hearing.

At the hearing, Dr. David Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, testified with the service personnel chiefs on recent recruiting and retention problems.

He said the troubles are only "of the moment" and will be relieved by adding recruiters, raising bonuses and talking up the value of military service with parents, teachers, coaches - "influencers" who have been advising youths not to join the military.

Chu suggested a better TRICARE plan for reservists is unneeded.

Graham disagreed, arguing that Reserve recruiting and retention shortfalls in the Army and Marine Corps are here to stay unless military family support structures are strengthened.

TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS) enrollments will begin April 26. TRS was a late compromise between Graham's plan to open all of TRICARE to drilling reservists who lack health insurance, and the Defense Department's opposition to any health benefit for drilling reservists.

The result, TRS, is a benefit both complex and restrictive. Only Reserve and **National Guard** members deactivated from post-9/11 deployments are eligible. They must have served at least 90 continuous days of active service. For every 90 days activated, they are eligible for a year of TRS, a scaled-down version of TRICARE Standard.

Enrollees must sign a binding agreement to remain in drill status, susceptible to

mobilization, for the duration of TRS coverage.

They will pay monthly premiums of \$75 for member-only TRS or \$233 for family coverage. They also will pay TRICARE Standard user fees, co-payments and deductibles. If a reservist stops the TRS premiums, coverage would end but the extended service obligation would stand.

Given operational demands on Guard and Reserve forces in the terrorism war, Graham said TRS isn't enough.

In February, he introduced a bill to offer TRICARE Standard benefits to all drilling reservists and their families. It would be the same Standard option available to active duty families, meaning no monthly premiums or extended service commitment as under TRS.

The bill has 12 co-sponsors but Graham said he expects at least 70 senators to back the plan when he offers it as a floor amendment to the 2006 defense authorization bill later this year.

A second part of S 337 would lower the age-60 start of Reserve retired pay for members who serve longer than 20 years.

Lowering Reserve retirement is appropriate, Military Coalition co-chairman Steve Strobbridge said, given the new likelihood reservists will be asked to deploy at least once every six years, affecting their civilian retirement benefits, 401k contributions and more.

Rep. Tom Latham, R-Iowa, introduced in the House a companion bill to Graham's.

The projected cost of the health portion of Graham's bill is \$3.8 billion over five years, half last year's estimate. Graham trimmed costs, he said, by limiting Reserve health benefits to TRICARE Standard, excluding TRICARE Prime, the managed care program.

Salazar Backs Expanding Veterans' Aid

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

The Durango Herald

13 April 2005

By Joe Hanel

Herald Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON - Troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan would get a package of new benefits if the G.I. Bill for the 21st century, backed by House Democrats, wins passage.

Rep. John Salazar joined House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and retired Gen. Wesley Clark at a Capitol press conference to promote the bill.

"During times of war, it seems like politicians offer veterans lip service," Salazar said.

The new G.I. Bill would:

Pay the full cost of college plus three years of living expenses during school. The current

G.I. Bill pays about two-thirds the cost of college, Democrats say.

Boost health-care spending for veterans by \$3.2 billion a year and offer better mental-health care.

Repeal the "Disabled Veterans Tax," allowing vets to keep both their disability pay and their full pensions.

Increase survivor benefits for spouses and children.

Protect **National Guard** and Reserve troops who face a pay cut when they are called up.

Many families of guardsmen "have actually lost their homes because of the cut in pay from serving abroad," Salazar said.

The bill also seeks to increase the size of the military to "adequate" levels, adding perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 new troops. Sen. John Kerry made increasing troop levels a key part of his failed presidential bid last year.

"Our military is now overextended, and our troops are having to spend extended stays in Iraq," said Salazar, who served in the Army from 1973 to 1976.

At the press conference, Salazar read the names of some of the troops from Colorado killed in action in Iraq, including Marine Cpl. Randy Rosacker, Sgt. 1st Class Randall Rehn, Capt. Russell Rippetoe and Lance Corporal Thomas Slocum.

"My friends, the G.I. Bill increases survivor benefits for those who have no father and no breadwinner," Salazar said.

The American Legion, which drafted the original G.I. Bill in 1944, supports the new version. Democrats hailed the 1944 bill as one of the most important laws Congress has ever passed.

Rep. Ike Skelton, the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said the current generation of veterans could rival the World War II generation, which returned home from the war to build the American middle class.

"It's my prediction that if we treat them right through this G.I. Bill - do more than put a bumper sticker on your SUV - that they, too, will become another greatest generation," Skelton said.

Disabled Vets Give Thumbs Up to New VA Career Program

[*Back to Table of Contents*](#)

American Forces Press Service

15 April 2005

By Donna Miles

WASHINGTON, April 14, 2005 – A new program at the Department of Veterans Affairs is helping disabled troops train for new careers while awaiting discharge from the military, with the goal of hiring them at the VA.

The program, dubbed “Vet IT,” launched as a pilot at the VA headquarters here in October, is winning acclaim as a win-win for everyone involved. Newly disabled veterans get a jump-start on new careers and, ideally, job offers with good benefits and advancement potential.

But Jennifer Duncan, who came up with the idea and oversees the VA program, said her agency gains as well, by attracting young, motivated employees who understand military veterans and their needs firsthand.

“This is the opportunity of a lifetime,” said former Staff Sgt. Matthew Braiotta, who was medically retired from the Army after an improvised explosive device attack in Fallujah, Iraq, left him with severe leg injuries in October 2003.

Like many participants in the new Vet IT program, Braiotta said he had hoped to make the military a career, but found his plans abruptly derailed. He had concerns about what kind of job his experience as an Army scout might land him outside the military, but now he’s a mid-level federal civilian employee at VA headquarters here, training as a budget analyst.

“The amazing thing is that I have no skills conducive to what I’m doing here, but they’re giving me a chance to learn them,” Braiotta said.

Former Army Cpl. Tristan Wyatt, another participant in the program, acknowledged that his resume is “short and sweet” and that he has no formal training for his job at the VA, conducting cyber-security for the agency’s computer systems.

Wyatt, who lost his right leg during a firefight in Fallujah in August 2003, said he’s “amazed” that the VA looks beyond this and offers him and his fellow veterans a fresh start in life. “They’re willing to train us and build us from the ground up,” Wyatt said. “It’s one of the huge benefits of this program. I’m still blown back by how giving they are here.”

But Duncan said disabled veterans like Braiotta and Wyatt bring far more to the VA than they realize. “They’re disciplined and energetic, and looking forward to starting new career paths,” she said.

And as they build careers at the agency, eventually to replace its aging workforce, these veterans bring a clear understanding of issues important to veterans, particularly disabled veterans, Duncan said. “Who can better understand a veteran than a veteran?” she said.

The Vet IT program helps disabled veterans, most of them wounded during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, transfer that understanding into careers where they can help their fellow veterans.

Most enter the program as volunteers while in the process of getting their medical board disability rating and military discharge. By law, the federal government can’t pay them for program participation while they’re still on the military rolls, Duncan explained.

While the program doesn’t guarantee a job, Duncan said it’s been successful so far in identifying permanent positions at the VA for participants.

The agency goes beyond offering steady jobs and valuable work experience, Duncan explained. Working through a wide range of partners, it helps participants move to the

Washington area, find places to live, navigate the local transportation system and even get gift cards for work clothes and other essentials if they need them.

“This is an individualized program. It’s not a job fair,” Duncan said. “These are young men and women who were on a career path that due to circumstances beyond their control, they can’t continue. So we’re starting them on a new career path and doing everything possible to help them as they do that.”

Kelly Wilson, who was medically retired as an Army specialist due to a severe respiratory disease he developed while working at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, said he was delighted to find himself in an interesting job with long-term potential.

At the VA, Wilson helps plan the operations that would keep the agency running in the event of a disaster or terrorist attack. It involves reviewing the VA’s essential functions and putting plans in place to ensure they wouldn’t be disrupted.

“It’s certainly interesting,” he said. And even with a college degree under his belt, he’s convinced, “I probably couldn’t have landed this job without this opportunity” provided through the Vet IT program.

So far, 27 disabled veterans have entered the program, with 10 of them being offered fulltime jobs at the VA.

Duncan hopes to eventually expand the program to other VA offices, but said the agency prefers to move slowly to be sure it gets the program right. “We want to make sure we match skill sets (between participants and their VA jobs) and that we don’t make promises we can’t live up to,” she said.

If former Army Staff Sgt. Robert Barden gets his say, many more veterans like himself will get the opportunity to participate in the Vet IT program. Barden received a traumatic brain injury and was partially paralyzed during a mortar attack in Balad, Iraq, in April 2004. Now, thanks to the Vet IT program, he’s a program analyst in the VA’s information technology office.

“It’s a great program that offered me a career in something I never knew I could do,” said Barden. “It can definitely put you on a path to start over and begin something new.”

Marne, Rainbow Soldiers Receive Combat Patch

Defend America

11 April 14, 2005

By Spc. Jimmy D. Lane, Jr.

FORWARD OPERATING BASE DAGGER, TIKRIT, Iraq - U.S. soldiers of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, Task Force Liberty, held a ceremony at Forward Operating Base Dagger to receive their combat patches April 4. The 1st Brigade Combat Team is a 3rd Infantry Division unit from Fort Stewart, Ga. attached to the 42nd Infantry Division of the New York Army National Guard.

Operation Iraqi Freedom III is not the first time soldiers from these two divisions have fought side by side.

“The combat patches being presented today are a reminder of another point in history where the Rainbow Division and Marne soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield as we do today,” said U.S. Army Col. Mark McKnight, combat team commander. “In the summer of 1918, the 42nd Infantry Division and the 3rd Infantry Division defeated the German army at the second battle of the Marne, making the turning point of the First World War.”

Maj. Gen. Joseph Taluto, Task Force Liberty commander, presented commanders of Task Force Liberty and their command sergeants major with 42nd Infantry Division combat patches. “It is hard to believe how much a small piece of cloth can mean to a soldier,” Taluto said.

Taluto went on to explain how throughout history, soldiers have always been proud to don a combat patch on their shoulder as a sign of having been in a battle.

The date of the ceremony was significant because two years ago to the day, the 1st Brigade Combat Team deposed former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

“As the sun rose over Baghdad, the regime of Saddam Hussein awoke to a new reality,” McKnight said. “Their propaganda could no longer stand up to the light of that morning sun. The Raider Brigade, as the first element of the first Infantry Division, had arrived in Baghdad. We came not as conquerors but as liberators. We came to help the Iraqi people shove aside a tyrant as the Iraqis embraced freedom and liberty as if they were a long lost brother.”

McKnight asked the soldiers to be proud of the patch they were now authorized to wear and to keep soldiers of the past in their minds.

“I would like all of you to remember one thing,” McKnight said.

“When you look at the combat patch you earned here today, remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.”

Military Confronts Combat Stress at Front Lines

American Forces Press Service

April 12, 2005

By Donna Miles

BAGHDAD, Iraq, April 11, 2005 – As troops here deal with stressors ranging from roadside bombs to checkpoints where it's hard to tell friend from foe, the military is ensuring they get the mental health support they need to remain with their units and avoid long-term problems.

Everyone in a combat zone experiences some degree of stress, Army Maj. Dara Josiah-Howze, a psychiatrist with the 55th Medical Company (Combat Stress Control) in Baghdad told the American Forces Press Service. "You have a normal person in an abnormal environment, and you're exposing them to abnormal situations."

When the Iraq operation began two years ago, the biggest source of stress was the combat operations, she said. Now it's the more elusive threats—improvised explosive devices, vehicle-borne IEDs and suicide bombers, among them.

Symptoms run the gamut, Josiah-Howze said, from eating and sleeping disorders to irritability or anxiousness. Some people startle easily; others demonstrate low energy levels or wake up with nightmares. Others have trouble maintaining focus or following through on a project or just feel generally down, she said.

Army Col. Thomas Burke, DoD director of mental health policy in Washington, said troops have experienced these symptoms throughout American military history. During the Civil War, they were called "nostalgia" or "soldier's heart," he said. During World War I, the affliction was "shell shock" and during World War II, "combat fatigue" or "battle fatigue."

Today, these symptoms are called "combat and operational stress reactions," the result of the extreme stress troops are exposed to in combat as well as the unpredictable counterinsurgency operations currently taking place in Iraq.

Sleep deprivation during extended operations, exposure to noise, heat or smoke and the danger of being hurt or killed or seeing others get hurt or killed, "all take a toll on a person's mental state," Burke said.

But this doesn't mean affected troops are mentally ill, Burke stressed. "What they are experiencing is a normal human reaction to an abnormal situation," he said.

And experience and research proves that the best way to treat these troops is to offer care as close to their units as possible, rather than "labeling them as broken" and evacuating them from the region. The latter approach actually puts them at higher risk of developing longer-term problems, Burke said.

"The whole approach to mental health is different than it once was," he said. "We're not pulling people out of line and sending them back to the states. Now the philosophy is to

treat these symptoms early, treat them far forward, treat them aggressively, and get these soldiers back to their jobs.”

This proactive, preventive approach to treatment keeps troops as close to their unit as possible so their friends and chain of command can maintain contact with them until they return to duty. And the treatment offered is relatively simple: sleep, rest and workshops rather than elaborate psychoanalyst techniques and procedures, Burke said.

“We refer to it as PIES,” he explained. “Proximity, as close to the unit as possible. Immediacy, providing treatment now, not evacuating them to the rear and treating them in a week. Expectation, maintaining the assumption that they will return to duty. And simplicity, keeping the treatment simple.”

Combat stress control teams are fanned out throughout Iraq to provide mental healthcare to servicemembers experiencing combat and operational stress reactions, and to help prevent others from developing them. In addition, behavioral health teams are embedded in units in Iraq as well as Afghanistan.

Much of the mobile teams’ focus is on prevention. They educate servicemembers and their chains of command about symptoms of combat and operational stress reactions, self-help techniques and exercises they can use to counter these reactions, and professional services available to help them.

Troops who request it or appear to need extra help are typically referred for “restorative care,” Josiah-Howze explained. This care, offered at fixed locations, is generally limited to 72 hours and includes more intensive stress and anger management, relaxation training and counseling through individual and group sessions.

During their unit visits, combat stress teams emphasize that nobody is immune to combat stress, regardless of their rank or position in the unit. “It affects everyone,” said Josiah-Howze. “We’ve treated everyone from the single teenager to senior officers.”

Josiah-Howze said she’s convinced that treating combat stress quickly and in the environment can help prevent the condition from evolving into more serious acute stress or post-traumatic stress disorders.

“Through the years, the military has realized that if you wait too long (to provide care), it can have negative effects,” she said. “The best way to deal with the issue is to keep (the affected troops) in the environment and to address the problem then and there.”

This approach will likely reduce the number of soldiers who will need Veterans Affairs Department mental health services later on, she said, and has the immediate advantage of keeping military units intact during their operations.

Our motto is to “Conserve the Fighting Spirit,” Josiah-Howze said. “We’re not here to remove soldiers,” Josiah-Howze said. “We’re here to help them with the problems they’re having so they can return to their units and keep fighting.”

Walter Reed War Wounded Cheer D.C.'s New Baseball team's win

Army News Service

April 15, 2005

By Michael E Dukes

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, April 15, 2005) — About 70 Walter Reed patients, who are recovering from injuries while serving in the Global War on Terrorism, were treated to a night out at the ballpark to see the Washington Nationals defeat the Arizona Diamondbacks here April 14.

While three Walter Reed buses delivered the patients from the hospital to the doorsteps of RFK Stadium, some people stopped on the sidewalks to wave or salute them. These supportive gestures didn't go unnoticed by the patients behind the buses' tinted windows, many of the patients smiled with pride.

A few of the patients attending the game were in wheelchairs, some walked with leg braces or crutches, one was blind, and most of the rest bore the scars and injuries of a wounded warrior.

Once the buses arrived at the stadium, some patients shook their heads as they saw mobs of thousands of fans making their way to the entry way. But the war wounded wouldn't have to worry about waiting in hour-long lines or go through the hassles of metal detectors on the way in. They were given VIP treatment by U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Marshals who parted a sea of fans in red caps and jerseys so the wounded warriors could bypass the lines and metal detectors. Many of the patients had enough metal inside them anyway that it would have drove the security guards crazy trying to search them as they entered the stadium.

Once in the stadium and as the National Anthem began to play, all the patients, except those in wheelchairs, stood proudly as 130 D.C. **National Guard** held a giant American flag which covered most of the outfield. As a formation of four Air **National Guard** fighter jets flew overhead, fireworks blasted up from the top of the stadium.

After President George W. Bush threw out the Nationals' first home pitch, the stadium erupted in a roar of jubilation. It had been more than 30 years since the Nation's capital has had its own Major League Baseball team.

Sitting in the 400 section beside first base, Staff Sgt. Gary Jackson, a Soldier wounded while serving in Iraq, said he was elated to be at the game. "I'm a huge baseball fan," he said with a smile.

Jackson, a Vermont native who has been receiving care at Walter Reed since June 2004, said living in Vermont he had always been a Montréal Expos fan in the past, even though they didn't win many games or sell very many tickets. "Now that I am in D.C., it's great to have my team now playing here as the Nationals."

He said it looked like their game was on and he was happy to see their popularity in D.C. Almost 46,000 fans turned up to support their new team.

Spc. Kenny Smith and Master Sgt. Tracy Evans, two other Operation Iraqi Freedom patients in attendance, both agreed they were having a good time at the game, and that it was nice to get away from the hospital for some fun and excitement.

When Nationals third baseman Vinny Castilla lofted a hit over the left-field wall everyone in the stadium jumped up in celebration. "That one's in the bullpen," said Smith while he clapped his hands and banged his noise sticks together.

The Nationals beat the Diamondbacks 5-3.

On the ride home, patients talked with each other about their favorite moments and about the souvenirs they picked up at the Stadium.

The complimentary trip, which included tickets to the game, red Nationals baseball caps, and \$20 in vouchers for food and drinks at the concession stands were courtesy of the Yellow Ribbon Fund, Inc., a Kensington, Md.-based charity to support America's men and women in uniform.

Walter Reed's Moral Welfare and Recreation office facilitated the trip to the game.

(Editor's Note: Michael Dukes writes for the Walter Reed Army Medical Center public affairs office.)

Staying Connected Over Many Miles Teen Builds Web site Honoring Father Deployed To Iraq

[*Back to Table of Contents*](#)

The Leaf-Chronicle

12 April 2005

By Ann Wallace

What do you do if you are a 13-year-old boy missing your dad, who is deployed to Iraq?

If you are computer savvy Zachary Berardo, you build a Web site.

The result: a touching testimony to the love of a son for his father, Staff Sgt. Tony Berardo, a member of the Tennessee Army National Guard 278th Regimental Combat Team.

With 11 years of Army National Guard experience, Tony knew that deployment to Iraq was inevitable. His son, Zachary didn't. The news about the looming 2004 summer deployment of the 278th RCT shook the Berardo family tree.

Duty calls

"I don't really like to talk about his leaving too much," Zachary says. "I mean, Dad asked

me to be the man of the house and take care of Mom, and watch out for my big sister, Amber."

Zachary's mission — to fulfill his dad's request to the best of his ability.

Like so many other military families coping with the deployment of a loved one, the Berardos are taking advantage of modern technology to communicate.

"I told my mom that I wanted make a Web site for my dad, but she kept putting me off for a couple weeks," Zachary says. "Eventually, I just started and then showed her what I had at that point."

Once he got started, it was only a matter of days before Zachary had www.ourherossgeberardo.com up and running.

Computer wiz

Zachary, a Kenwood Middle School seventh-grade student, has a fascination with anything to do with computers. In fact, his favorite television show is a cable network program called "Screensavers."

"Zach's site is awesome," says Richard Hawkingberry, who sought Zachary's newly acquired Web site building expertise to concoct a Web site for his brother, Spc. John Hawkingberry, also deployed with the 278th RCT.

"My site is nowhere as good as Zach's, but he helped me to build a site, too," Hawkingberry says. "It was a frustrating effort for me. I would get so aggravated. To think that a 13-year-old could run circles around me, a 35-year-old man. But that was the way it was. I would get stumped and call up Zach, and within two minutes he would have the problem solved."

Zachary's mom, Cheryl Berardo, also is amazed by his computer skills.

"Tony will send photos from Iraq, and Zach will add them to the site. And it brings tears to my eyes every time I click on," Cheryl says.

Once Zachary started building the site, he created a page of favorite love songs shared by his parents.

"He didn't even ask me what songs to choose, he just knew," says Cheryl.

But, Zach is quick to give his mom credit as well.

"I'm not too good with words, Mom wrote most of the text for the pages with input from me, but I did all the other stuff," Zachary says.

Laura Edwards is a fellow 278th RCT wife. She and her husband, Staff Sgt. James Edwards, have known the Berardo family since Zachary was a toddler.

"Whenever I have a computer problem, I call Zach. He has set up a Web cam for me, installed a DVD writer and increased my computer's memory, to name just a few things," says Laura, who considers herself "computer-challenged."

"Zach is good at everything he does. His Web site shows how proud he is and how much he loves his dad," Laura says. "For a son to feel that way about his dad is pretty special in

my book."

The word is spreading that young Zachary is a computer wiz.

Shirley Kenney-Tomasi is a family friend who called on Zachary's expertise for a computer printer problem that she couldn't remedy.

"Zach is quite proficient," Shirley says. "I gave him his first paying job. His mom brought him over here, and within a few minutes he had the problem resolved."

More to come

June marks one year since the 278th RCT deployed. Zachary hopes to add a movie to his Web site before the unit returns home.

"There are a few more bells and whistles that I would like to add once I figure how to do them, which I will," says Zachary with confidence.

"This site is something keeping us as a family closer right now with Tony gone," Cheryl says. "And it will be something that we'll all look back on in years to come with a special place in our hearts."

End

[Back to Table of Contents](#)