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Weekly News for National Guard Families

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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>

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/>

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.

Military Unit Holds Practice Terrorism Drill In Havana

The Daily Times

29 April 2005

By Elaine Krewer Spencer

HAVANA -- The specter of terrorism showed its face in Havana Tuesday.

But luckily for the residents of this Illinois River town, it was only a drill for an elite military unit equipped to deal with terrorist attacks on the homeland.

A simulated traffic stop that proved to be anything but routine was the basis for the major terrorism preparedness exercise carried out by a special unit of the Illinois **National Guard**.

Members of the Fifth Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team, based in Bartonville, and of the Havana Fire Department practiced their response to a scenario that began with police stopping a speeding motorist and ended with the "discovery" of a biological agent, possibly anthrax, concealed in two railroad cars.

Major Gene Links, commander of the Fifth WMD-CST unit, said the exercise was designed to "sharpen our skills" in identifying and responding to "CBRNE agents" -- shorthand for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive substances or devices.

The unit consists of 22 active duty Air Force and Army **National Guard** officers, who participate in about 20 such exercises and 500 hours of training per year, Links said.

"Our mission is to deploy to the site of a suspected or potential terrorist incident to help authorities identify the threats and assess the current or potential consequences," he said. The unit also has the means to help local authorities -- faced with a situation that would overwhelm the capabilities of most small departments -- contain the threat, protect residents, obtain medical aid for the injured, and assess the incident's effects on the environment.

Havana Fire Chief John Kachanuk said the exercise had been planned for several months and involved nine of the 21 members of the city fire department.

"Our responsibility was overall incident command, and to supply water for the (**National Guard**) decontamination unit," Kachanuk said. "It was a matter of us learning what our cog in the wheel would be, and we did our part."

The drill scenario started when police stopped a motorist for speeding and discovering him to be a known terrorist with an expired visa. Shortly afterward, police spotted two railroad cars on the outskirts of the city containing "equipment that was not normal," leading them to suspect someone might be attempting to create a CBRNE agent, according to Links.

The Fifth WMD-CST team was then called in to determine what the agent was and how to respond to it. Links said the team is organized around "core competencies" -- areas of expertise that may be needed in a terrorist situation. They include command and control, field lab testing and analysis, interagency communications, digital hazard prediction, advanced life support, decontamination and environmental monitoring and management.

The unit's equipment includes a mobile "lab on wheels" to analyze suspected CBRNE agents; a communications van with secure telephone, Internet and satellite services; Global Positioning System devices; protective suits and decontamination equipment; and computer data bases with access to weather data, aerial photos and other critical information, according to Links.

Kachanuk said he was impressed with the abilities of the WMD-CST team.

"Their capabilities were just off the chart," he said. "Most civilians, including me, had no idea what they were capable of doing" in a potential terrorist situation, he added.

"I have nothing but praise for them. I feel lucky our community was picked for this, and I hope we can host something like this again.

DEPLOYMENT

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Selma Shows Pride, Respect For Troops

Selma-Times.com

1 May 2005

The streets of Selma were filled with young kids yesterday. In their hands they held American Flags and in their hearts they held respect for people, soldiers, most of whom they had never met.

Holding their hands were teachers, parents and other family members giving them the guidance and understanding of what was transpiring in the streets in front of them.

Alongside the children were family members of the soldiers. Tears rolled down many faces and hearts filled with pride as the troops rolled by.

The purpose of this gathering was to send off some of Selma's finest soldiers.

The 122nd Support Group from the Army **National Guard** loaded up in a bus and headed to training in preparation to go overseas for service in the war on Iraq.

The route they took was not a lonely one thanks to the many folks that lined the streets to wave their flags and show their love and support.

This could not have been possible without the help and organization of the City of Selma, Dallas County, the towns of Valley Grande and Orrville.

The leaders of each spent hours organizing this event to make sure that the soldiers left

Dallas County with out a proper sendoff.

We need to remember though that this should not be considered a one time show of support as the rest of the unit will leave in November.

Upon their departure we should put the same effort forth then as what took place yesterday.

We also need to make sure that we continue to keep Selma's soldiers and all those who are taking a stand for our country in our prayers.

Thanks Selma for once again showing a passion for our people.

BENEFITS

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Reserve, Guard Get Health Care

Biloxi Sun Herald

April 27, 2005

By Mike Lillis; The Sun Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - Long denied the same health-care packages as other military personnel, qualified members of the **National Guard** and Reserves began receiving identical benefits Tuesday, but even the sponsors of the law concede it doesn't go far enough in providing universal care.

"Today marks an important stride forward in expanding eligibility for... military health benefits to our Guard members and reservists and their families, " said New York Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, a sponsor of the initial legislation extending the benefits.

"But more work needs to be done to ensure that our Guard and Reserve have access to health-care benefits they need and deserve."

Under the new rules, guardsmen and reservists will be eligible for one year of military health care, called TRICARE, for every 90-day stint of active duty they serve in the aftermath of 9/11.

Beneficiaries, who must also agree to serve a year in the Selected Reserve, will pay monthly fees of \$75 for individual plans and \$233 for families - about a quarter of actual costs -- with the Department of Defense paying the rest.

The changes had been contested by the Pentagon, which, in recent years, has struggled in vain to keep exploding health-care costs from consuming larger chunks of its \$420 billion budget. Since 2001, the price tag for covering the nearly nine million TRICARE beneficiaries has leapt from \$18 billion to \$36 billion, with most of that money going to retirees and family members.

But some lawmakers and private groups contend the price of failing to extend health care for guardsmen and reservists would transcend figures calculated in dollars and cents.

John Goheen, spokesman for the **National Guard** Association of the United States, a private advocacy group, said the new rules effectively address health-care concerns for guardsmen after they return from duty, but do nothing to ready them for combat operations.

"What we're saying is there's a cost associated with not providing health care," Goheen said.

"The continuing cost is that these people are often not deployable at the time that they're called."

Nearly 20 percent of Guardsmen and Reservists lack health coverage, Goheen said, adding that about 7 percent of Army Guardsmen were recently deemed unfit for deployment due to medical concerns that could have been prevented with adequate care.

"The numbers for reservists are even higher," he said.

Long considered arbiters of domestic peacekeeping efforts, Guardsmen and Reservists have been flung into a role of broadened significance since the start of the war on terror. About 40 percent of America's soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq are either Guardsmen or Reservists, and that number is expected to rise in coming years.

"It's a new world," said Clinton. "We're using an all volunteer force in ways we've never done before."

Clinton and South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham used the stage Tuesday to push also another proposal, introduced last February, which would allow all members of the Guard and Reserves and their families access to TRICARE regardless of duty status.

"Guardsmen and Reservists are the only part-time federal employees who are currently ineligible for federal government full-time health care benefits," Graham said. "It's my goal...to alleviate this inequity."

Sens. Bond, Leahy Introduce Legislation To End Housing Benefits Gap For Active Duty Guard, Reserve

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US Fed News

April 28, 2005

By US Fed News

WASHINGTON - The office of Sen. Christopher S. 'Kit' Bond, R-Mo., issued the following press release:

Sens. Kit Bond (R-Mo.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) Thursday introduced legislation to eliminate an imbalance in the small housing allowance for enlisted members and officers of the nation's 870,000-member Selected Reserve of the United States, which includes the **National Guard** and Reserves. The bill would mandate that members of the reserves

who are called to active duty receive the same monthly housing allowance as active duty members of the military. This increase would raise allowances on average by \$300 to \$400.

"The reliance on the Guard and Reserve has increased substantially since the attacks of 9-11. As a result, our members have been called upon in large numbers to support the war on terror," Bond said. "These men and women have willingly answered the call to duty. As our government continues to ask more from them, it is only fair that we provide for these citizen-soldiers and their families."

"Since 9/11 we have been asking our **National Guard** and Reserve members to take on greater and greater responsibilities and risks," said Leahy. "They have bravely accepted their key roles in our national defense, and they deserve better than the second-class treatment they have gotten in return. We need to ensure that our dedicated men and women receive identical benefits for identical effort and sacrifice when they go on active duty. Our citizen-soldiers are fighting side by side with active duty military units, and it's fitting and fair that they have equal benefits and treatment while they are putting their lives on hold to serve our country. Our bill helps bridge that gap."

The **National Guard** and Reserve Housing Equity Act of 2005, which has been endorsed by several major Reserve associations, including the **National Guard** Association of the United States, the Army Association of the United States and the Enlisted Association of the **National Guard** of the United States, would eliminate the discretion of the Office of the Secretary of Defense to set a lower housing allowance for reservists called to serve short terms. Under current law, members of the **National Guard** maintaining private residences who are called for active duty for periods of fewer than 140 days receive a Basic Allowance of Housing II (BAHII). The allowance has consistently been set at lower levels than the active duty housing allowance.

Bond and Leahy pointed out that the **National Guard** now comprises 50 percent of the combat force in Iraq and 40 percent of the total force. While the role of the Guard has expanded the disparity in compensation between active and Guard/Reserve, particularly in housing, has remained the same. For many citizen-soldiers who are being deployed for longer periods of time, Leahy and Bond's legislation will offer much needed and deserved housing assistance.

Bond and Leahy, the co-chairs of the Senate **National Guard** Caucus, have championed legislation to protect members of the Selected Reserves in the past.

Iowa Soldier Planting Sweet Corn In Iraq

Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier

2 May 2005

BURLINGTON --- Command Sgt. Major Richard Bayliss has brought a kernel of the Midwest to the Middle East.

The top noncommissioned officer in the Iowa Army **National Guard**'s 224th Engineer Battalion has planted a patch of sweet corn inside a fence line at a U.S. Army post in the Sunni Triangle in Iraq.

If the weather cooperates, the soldiers of the 224th should have fresh sweet corn come mid-June.

"The command sergeant major is a corn-raising fool back home," Lt. Col. Todd Jacobus, the 224th commander, wrote in an e-mail message last week. The 224th, deployed in January, is based in Fairfield, with companies in Burlington, Mount Pleasant and Ottumwa and a detachment in Keokuk.

When his tour of duty ends next spring, Bayliss, 38, will return to the 2,500 acres he farms with his sons near Hedrick, northeast of Ottumwa. This is the first year Bayliss can remember missing out on planting his sweet corn in Iowa.

"It is hard to be this far away from the farm operation," Bayliss said by e-mail.

Bayliss found a promising quarter-acre in Iraq across from the battalion motor pool and planted hybrid seed corn mailed to him from Iowa.

"I'm curious to see if (the corn) will grow and stay alive in this environment with so much heat, pollinate properly and produce an ear," Bayliss said. "It takes a lot of water and I'm not sure we can supply that amount timely enough to keep it alive."

The 224th could use some sweet news. Two soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb while they were riding in a Humvee in February. Another soldier was killed when he was shot by a sniper last month.

Bayliss says planting the corn helps keep him connected to Iowa despite all the chaos going on around him.

"I think it's neat that I'm planting a corn crop here in Iraq at the same time that my sons are planting the corn crops in Iowa," Bayliss said.

HOMEFRONT: DEALING WITH DEPLOYMENT

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A Town Called to Duty: For a Rural Vermont Community, the Conflict in Iraq Hits Home; With Its Guardsmen Deployed, Locals Band Together to Cover Their Absence

Los Angeles Times

May 2, 2005

By Elizabeth Mehren, Times Staff Writer

ENOSBURG FALLS, Vt. — For four years, Matt Tracy spent his days pumping gas and repairing car engines at Mark LaRose's Texaco on Main Street. At night, the 33-year-old father of two studied law. He fended off frequent entreaties from military recruiters and held fast to his dream of becoming a litigator.

Then in December, LaRose was called up for active duty, along with the entire **National Guard** unit in this remote, rural town of 1,473. The deployment of 88 men in Company B, 1st Battalion, 172nd Armor Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division — better known as Bravo Company — has touched just about everyone in the area.

For Tracy, it meant his plans to exchange his wrench for an attache case went on hold.

"Right now I am just going to be a well-educated mechanic," he said, his voice devoid of any emotion beyond simple resignation. "There is a point where you just have to accept it. What Mark has to do over there is much worse and much more of a sacrifice than whatever I have to give up here."

Two years into the war, many Americans have become numb to the conflict in Iraq. Though the war is a nightly news event, it is far away and is beyond any individual's control. But in this small Vermont town, the war could not be more personal.

Town meetings now take place without Selectman Brian Westcom, who also is the road commissioner. Chris Beaudry, who works for the state highway department, was not around to clear the roads during an especially snowy winter. Firefighter Shawn Blake is gone along with LaRose, the service station owner who also is the volunteer fire chief.

Dennis Sheridan will not be coaching soccer at the junior high his son Tyler attends, and the school does not know who will replace him. Jimmy Gleason, a school bus driver who also maintained the fleet, is absent. The hunter safety class held twice a year by Eric Chates — who also works as the mechanic for the Enosburg Armory — has been canceled.

Each day brings new evidence of the men's absence: Wives attend social functions alone. Children send sports scores by e-mail to fathers who never missed a game until now. Elderly parents arrange rides to doctors' appointments because their sons are not there to drive them. Businesses are stretched thin. Matt Tracy says his workload at LaRose Texaco has tripled. Tammie Randall, hired strictly to pump gas, keeps the books, handles the payroll and washes the service vehicles.

Five of the 98 employees at Blue Seal Feeds are gone. An electric candle glows in their

honor at the main entrance to the grain and animal feed company, and five enormous yellow ribbons hang from a six-story silo.

"Everyone is working extra hard, and we have gone to a temp agency to try to fill the vacancies," said plant manager Paul Adamczak. "It affects us because we have lost people with years of experience. You can't replace that. We have lost skill, not just employees."

Adamczak's son, Mike, 33, was among the plant workers deployed.

Like the town, the father remains stoic. "We're Vermonters," Adamczak said. "We're not the great vocal communicators. This is something you think about, something you feel every day — but something you don't say anything about."

Quietly, neighbors pitch in to help the families of those who have left. Donna Magnant, a first-grade teacher's aide whose husband, Raymond, and son Jon were deployed, said the snow on her driveway and walkway seemed to magically disappear all winter, as friends dropped by to shovel and plow.

The Magnants were engaged to be married when Raymond went to Vietnam with the Army almost 40 years ago, right out of high school. Both have lived in Enosburg Falls their entire lives.

"Neither one of us, I am sure, thought we would have to face something like this again," said Magnant, 58.

All 63 assigned members of Bravo Company are in Iraq. Of the 25 support soldiers attached to the unit, most are training at Camp Shelby, Miss., and will head to the Middle East soon; a handful found they had medical conditions that prevented them from serving overseas. The unit is scheduled to be gone for 18 months. Though women have belonged to the unit in the past, Bravo Company is all male at this time.

Bravo Company joined about 1,400 other members of the Vermont Guard who had been called up in recent months, nearly half the state's roster — making Vermont second only to Hawaii in the per capita call-up of guardsmen. The Hawaiian units, however, include people from other states. The Vermont guardsmen come from their home state.

The average age of the men deployed from Bravo Company is 40, but some are old enough to have grandchildren. At least a third have served in the Guard for 20 years or more. Answering the call of their country is something people in Enosburg Falls do, not something they question. If there is opposition to the war, people keep it to themselves, deferring to the prevailing sentiment of patriotism.

"Most people around here would go if they were asked," said Steve Tracy, who works at Blue Seal Feeds. "Basically, it is how we were brought up."

Tracy, 55 — no relation to Matt Tracy — has five family members in the Guard: two sons, a nephew, a son-in-law and a brother-in-law. "It has just become our community's price for the way we live," said Adamczak, his boss. "If you look at it any other way, you are kidding yourself. Nobody is going to protect our lifestyle if we don't do it. This is a necessary, continuing commitment."

As teller Jeannie West cashes paychecks and processes mortgage payments at Merchants

Bank on Main Street, she glances at a snapshot thumbtacked to her work station. It shows four men in camouflage — all family members who have been called up. The last to be summoned was her son Joshua, 22, who left college in nearby Burlington when he was sent to Iraq in January.

West, 49, considers it an honor when customers ask about her son, and tell her they are proud that a boy from Enosburg Falls is representing the United States in Iraq.

"I could not imagine living somewhere where people did not feel like this," she said.

Still, West said: "The town seems sadder because everybody talks about the guys who are gone. Everyone here went to school with somebody in the Guard. Everybody knows someone. Everyone is connected, somehow, to someone who is over there."

As their fathers and grandfathers did, many young people here enlist in the military straight out of high school. When they return home, they often join the Guard — signing up for extra income, and for an opportunity to continue to serve.

Edward Grossman, principal of Enosburg Falls High School, said support for the military effort was so strong that when he surveyed his 375 students about starting an ROTC program, half said they wanted one. The program will begin in the fall.

When Bravo Company was deployed from St. Albans in December, the students pressed so hard to see the ceremony that Grossman arranged for a live broadcast in the school auditorium. As cameras panned on the unit, Grossman, 55, heard squeals of recognition: "There's my cousin!" "There's my brother!" "There's my dad!"

Enosburg Falls nestles in low hills in northwestern Vermont, 10 miles from the Canadian border. Most of the town was built in the 19th century, starting when the first dairy farm was settled in 1806. In a quarter-mile commercial district, Radio Shack and the Family Dollar store stand out as franchises among locally owned enterprises like Leon's Kitchen.

There is almost 100% employment. Three-quarters of the population graduates from high school, going on to earn an average annual income of \$32,000. They are laborers at the feed company and a pulp mill. They drive trucks. They are mechanics, cashiers and office workers. Many work on dairy farms. Some have jobs at an IBM plant 45 minutes away.

Enosburg Falls is surrounded by villages, bringing the population of the region residents refer to as Enosburg to about 2,500.

The area's uncommon stability has helped it withstand the loss of the guardsmen. But there are signs everywhere that the men are not forgotten.

Yellow ribbons cling to door knockers, lampposts and bay windows. Nine houses on Duffy Hill, a 1 1/2 -mile road, are draped with blue-star banners, indicating a soldier on active duty. A nearby trailer boasts a sign: "Gone to Iraq, Be Back in 18 Months."

Jars filled with pennies, nickels and dimes sit on office counters. The coins pay for postage to send goodie boxes to the guardsmen. Cars and pickups sport magnets honoring Bravo Company. A busy local restaurant, the Abbey, offers 50% discounts to Guard families.

Every other Saturday, Lise Gates, 50, turns her arcade and bowling alley over to children of the guardsmen so their mothers can have a break. Gates, who has no relatives in Bravo

Company, e-mails photographs of the kids at play to their dads.

They thank her and she wonders why.

"Why thank me, when they're the ones putting their lives on the line so we can be safe?" Gates said. "I think a majority of them wanted to go because they felt if they didn't, a war was going to happen right here. A lot of us here feel that way."

The elementary school started its own support group for Guard children. An English teacher at Enosburg Falls High assigned her students to write an essay comparing a recent graduate — who has served twice in Iraq — to Beowulf, a great Scandinavian warrior from the 6th century. The graduate, Ben Pathode, has two brothers at the school.

School secretary Debbie Shover's 22-year-old nephew is in Iraq. Shover, 50, said that since the guardsmen shipped out townspeople thought in terms of days, not months or years.

Enosburg Falls, she said, has unofficially adopted a new way of telling time. "Now, today, another day we can mark off. And then, when they come home. Nothing in between."

When a fire broke out on Main Street one cold night in February, the guardsmen's absence seemed more glaring than usual. The blaze demolished an entire block of eight apartments and five businesses — among them, a furniture company.

Firefighters converged from as far as Quebec. But LaRose, the volunteer fire captain, was missing. LaRose, 49, Bravo Company's command sergeant major, is known for his ability to take charge in an emergency. He joined the Guard almost 30 years ago.

"We put the fire out," said Town Administrator Harold Foote. "But we really missed him." Foote, 49, said he was worried about what would happen when the spring floods started. In the past, the Guard unit stacked sandbags to halt onrushing waters. The June Dairy Festival — the town's biggest event of the year — also concerns him, because guardsmen traditionally manage the crowds and traffic.

"It sounds like small things, but it really confuses a community when you are used to relying on a group of guys like this," Foote said. "And we haven't gone through a whole year's cycle yet."

LaRose's gas station, with its big red Texaco star sign, is a local landmark — the only service station for miles where customers can still get their gas pumped and their windshields cleaned without getting out of their cars.

"Mark kept it like that, religiously," Matt Tracy said. He has vowed to maintain his boss' high service standards: "It is our responsibility to keep it like that until he gets back."

Tracy said he and his boss used to confer on minor problems and emergencies alike. Now he has no one to turn to. "Mark was a leader," he said, "not just with the **National Guard** or the fire department. He was my leader too."

As he tries to make the right decisions, Tracy asks himself: What would Mark do? Until now, Tracy said, he never realized how one man's absence could make such a difference.

America Supports You: Wounded Troops, Families Receive Free Tickets

American Forces Press Service

April 27, 2005

By Rudi Williams

WASHINGTON— Through the goodwill and generosity of thousands of people with unused frequent flyer miles and U.S. airlines, the Fisher House Foundation has given out nearly 3,000 free airline tickets to war-wounded servicemembers and their families since the giveaway program started in January 2004.

Army Capt. Daniel M. Gade, a patient at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, was seriously injured in Iraq on Jan. 10 by an improvised explosive device. Gade lost his right leg as a result of the incident. U.S. Army photo

About one-third - some 1,000 tickets -- have been given away during the first four months of this year. And the number is constantly growing.

Through its partnership with the Operation Hero Miles program, Fisher House has given away more than 100 million donated frequent flyer miles to bring families and loved ones to the bedsides of wounded combatants, said Jim Weiskopf, Fisher House vice president for communications.

Operation Hero Miles was created in 2004 by U.S. airlines with the help of Maryland Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger to provide free round-trip tickets donated by the American public to the almost 500 soldiers arriving each day from Iraq on rest and recuperation leave.

People eligible for free tickets fall into two categories:

Wounded servicemen and women from Iraq and Afghanistan with an approved convalescent leave may be given a free round-trip airline ticket for a trip from the military or Veterans Affairs medical center where they're being treated to their home and return if they're not eligible for government-funded airfare.

Qualifying servicemen and women may be given free round-trip tickets to enable their family or close friends to visit them while they're being treated at the medical center.

Weiskopf explained many fiances and fiancées take advantage of the donated tickets because the government generally pays for up to three family members to visit very seriously injured troops.

In a flyer entitled "Be a Hero, Donate Your Frequent Flyer Miles!" the foundation said Army Capt. Daniel MacArthur Gade and his family were brought together at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here with free airline tickets.

Gade was seriously injured in Iraq by an improvised explosive device on Jan. 10, and his right leg was amputated at Walter Reed.

"The Army could fly three relatives at government expense to his bedside -- his wife, Wendy, and his parents, Ron and Erica Gade. Through its partnerships with major airlines, Fisher House Foundation provided airline tickets for other members of Gade's family, to include his daughter Anna Grace. With his family by his side to support him, Gade faces a lengthy period of recovery and rehabilitation," the flyer read.

"Fisher House Foundation is able to help the Gade family and the families of hundreds of other servicemen and women wounded or injured in Iraq or Afghanistan due to the generosity of airline passengers who have donated their frequent flyer miles to help reunite families," the flyer continued. "We take over where the government entitlements end and provide airline tickets to servicemembers and family members."

Weiskopf credits Mary Jo Myers, wife of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, with being a catalyst for creating the free frequent flyer miles tickets for wounded servicemembers and their families. "What Mrs. Myers envisioned is that the servicemembers are young, so the parents are still working and trying to be by their loved one's bedside while trying to keep their jobs too," Weiskopf said. "So a lot of them try to commute back and forth."

One day in the fall of 2003, when Mary Jo Myers was talking to family members of wounded servicemembers while visiting Walter Reed with her husband, she said she became concerned about family members being able to afford to travel back and forth from their loved ones' bedsides.

"I was talking to one dear mother" who was caring for four children and her own widowed mother at home, Myers said. "She was there for the amputation of her son's leg, which was going to take place the next day. Yet, she had to turn around and go right back (home) because it was the beginning of the school year, and she had children to support, and she was a kindergarten teacher."

Myers said she was touched by the woman's story about using the one trip to Walter Reed that the government supplied. "Her son was going to facing long months of rehabilitation and her one trip was used up," she said.

"About the same time, there was a young soldier from Micronesia who lost three limbs," Myers noted. "His father was with him and his mother eventually came. But his father was here with him for more than a year. He couldn't go back and forth.

"I just thought, 'Oh, my goodness - family members trying to come from Micronesia to support these young men and women when they face months and months of rehabilitation and often 20 or 30 surgeries,'" she said.

Myers said it was coincidental that when she started talking to people about her concerns, many said they'd been talking to Mary Winkenwerder about the same thing. Winkenwerder is the wife of Dr. William Winkenwerder, DoD's assistant secretary of defense for health affairs.

"She had been visiting patients like I had and had come to the same conclusion," Myers said. "So we started off talking with Congressman Ruppertsberger because that's when Congress had accumulated a lot of air miles for the active duty to go on R...R for troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom."

She noted that supporters of the families of wounded troops were hoping to "piggyback" on that program since the government was now funding the R...R trips.

Myers said the free air miles program can be "a lifesaver." She said she has found that many families she asks don't about the program.

Myers said she's heard many poignant stories about families being separated by distance, particularly when wives travel to be at a husband's side, leaving children at home in the care of relatives. "Children always have issues, whether they be preschoolers or teenagers, and they need mom too. And she's really torn," Myers said. "At least this allows her some of the travel back and forth to keep the injured military member's spirits up and to see different family members and friends."

Request for tickets have to originate from the servicemember and forwarded to Fisher House by a hospital's social work staff, family assistance center or service casualty office. "All we want to know is the reason for the hospitalization, and we don't make any distinction whether it was combat related, training accident or sports injury if they're hospitalized due to service in Iraq or Afghanistan," Weiskopf noted.

Request forms are available on the foundation's Web site. A case manager or other individual from the patient's medical facility must validate the request form.

"Even though these are free tickets, we spend money running this program, including hiring a staff member to manage the program," Weiskopf said. "We pay the Sept. 11 airport security fee and some other fees, such as the fee to change a ticket. We're working with medical problems and people can't always predict when they are going to have to travel."

America Supports You: Free Mother's Day Videoconferencing Offered

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American Forces Press Service

April 27, 2005

WASHINGTON – The Freedom Calls Foundation will provide free videoconferencing for servicemembers and their families over Mother's Day weekend, May 7–8.

The Freedom Calls Foundation enables deployed troops to remotely attend graduations and other important family milestones, such as birthdays and the birth of babies.

The private 20- to 30-minute high-tech videoconferences are scheduled to link troops at Al Asad Airfield and Camp Taji in Iraq with family members at specified locations in 10 cities across the United States on those two days, said Ed Bukstel, Freedom Calls Foundation co-founder.

The foundation is part of the Defense Department's America Supports You campaign, which spotlights how Americans across the country are supporting the men and women of the U.S. military.

The foundation provides video services and equipment to military hospitals and bases around the world. Its services enable troops to remotely attend graduations and other important family milestones, such as birthdays and the birth of babies.

The 10 cities that will host the videoconferences are Atlanta; New York; Kansas City; Wilmington, N.C.; Groton, Conn.; Dallas; San Antonio; Los Angeles; Fayetteville, Ark.; and Chicago.

Families wishing to connect with their loved ones during the Mother's Day weekend should contact Bukstel at ebukstel@freedomcalls.org

Family Relief: Bill Would Provide Job Assistance For Military Families

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Clovis News Journal

2 May 2005

By Marlena Hartz: CNJ staff writer

It was a ladder and a light bulb that most recently reminded Bethany Hiller of the man who is missing in her life — her husband, a Cannon Air Force Base senior airman deployed Kyrgyzstan in central Asia.

“I had to buy a ladder to change a light bulb outside. And I had a major problem with my car,” Hiller said.

“It’s the little things that you take for granted,” said 22-year-old Hiller, who resides in a two-story house on the Cannon Air Force Base and usually saves maintenance chores for her husband.

But it isn’t only the little things that have changed since her husband’s deployment. Hiller left her job as a bank teller to be closer to her family in Maryland for the 12 weeks of her husband’s deployment. Now that she has returned to the base, she is unemployed.

“It would have been great if I could have kept my job,” Hiller said, who values working for a variety of reasons — it keeps her mind off her husband, develops important career skills, and gives her extra money to spend on recreation.

U.S. Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M, wants to make things easier for military dependents such as Hiller.

Udall proposed bill follows the same basic formula as the rest of the Family and Medical Leave Act, allowing 12 weeks of leave for a specified purpose and requiring employee notice and certification. Under the bill, the employee would be able to take leave when the family member is on active duty in support of a contingency operation.

The departure of a family member called up for active duty can put a tremendous burden on his or her loved ones, imposing significant financial and emotional hardships, Udall explained.

“In preparation for a deployment, military families often have to scramble to arrange for child care, to pay bills, to contact their landlords or mortgage companies, and take care of other things that many of us deal with on a daily basis,” Udall said. “This bill will allow the immediate family member of someone called to active duty to use his or her benefits under the Family and Medical Leave Act to take unpaid leave to deal with issues directly related to that person’s deployment.”

Mark Marius, president of the 70-member Cannon Spouses’ Club, listens often to the woes of those who would benefit most from the proposed bill.

“I would say about one-third of our club would benefit (from being able to take leave),” Marius said.

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