



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

National Guard Changing To Mirror Active Army
Soldiers Train To Keep The Home Fires Doused

BENEFITS

Guard In Line For Better Benefits
House Passes Bills To Create New National Guard Benefits
Panel Backs Free Tuition For Some In La. Guard

GUARD IN IRAQ

Kentuckian Plans Derby Party For His Military Unit In Iraq

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Army Reaches Out To Connect Children Of Military Reservists Serving Overseas

GENERAL

House Panel Backs Tuition Plan To Promote National Guard Re-Enlistment
Military Policies Applauded
Warriors Surprise Moms With Cards; Company's Generosity Makes It Happen

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.

National Guard Changing To Mirror Active Army

Daily American Republic

3 May 2005

By Michelle Friedrich ~ Associate Editor

Like every other state, Missouri is restructuring its Army National Guard system to mirror the full-time Army in order to better meet the needs of the evolving battlefield abroad and homeland security.

"The National Guard has not changed its force structure in a long period of time to match the active Army's (structure)," explained Maj. Chris Mickan, administrative officer at the Poplar Bluff armory. "Active Army is continuously upgrading their force structure, as well as their technology."

In the past, Mickan said, the National Guard has not been funded in the same capacity as the regular Army.

"With the new war on terrorism and the new reality of the guard deploying like the active component, we have to be able to be a piece of that puzzle that can fit in and be a fast responder nearer to the active Army's place in theater," Mickan said. "What we are doing (with the restructuring), the Missouri Army National Guard is mirroring the active Army."

Mickan said the federal National Guard Bureau "came to the table" seeking these types of changes. "It has not been an overnight decision; this had been a planned decision with the Guard Bureau and each leader of each state for it to reach this point," Mickan explained.

During a recent briefing, Brig. Gen. King Sidwell told the guard officials that Missouri was going to "probably come out better than most states in the continental U.S.A.," Mickan explained. "We were one of the luckier states.

"We kept a lot of the existing units. Some other states totally transformed (the units in) their entire state."

Missouri has an estimated 7,900 in its National Guard and it will maintain the number and grow to 8,100 soldiers by September 2006, Mickan said.

"We'll pretty well sustain our numbers," he said. "Other states have lost significantly, hundred to I could say thousands."

Mickan said the guard leadership has "already been very proactive" by asking the senior commanders where they want to put their units.

"It's not a top-down decision," Mickan said. The chief of staff, Col. Dwight Lusk, and Sidwell, the adjutant general (TAG) for Missouri, brought in brigade commanders and command sergeant majors to discuss the changes, he said.

According to Mickan, the various components, such as engineers, aviation, field artillery and military police, were put in a conference room together and told "here are the transformations we're going to. Here are the units you'll be getting. Where are your strengths and weaknesses?"

"Tell me where you want your units in the state of Missouri? Tell me how we can better support you so you can command and control your unit?"

The intent was not to cause the soldiers to have to reclassify and move from one side of the state to the other, Mickan said.

For the soldiers, who are serving active-duty missions like the 735th's Delta Company, "they haven't been forgotten," Mickan explained. "The TAG said all the soldiers will have a home in the Missouri Army National Guard.

"This is considered a three-year transition period from training year '06 to TY '08. Some units will be standing up sooner than others, and those units are the ones that are going to have to be a little more fast tracking."

Mickan said there will be time to transition the "mobilized soldiers back into their home units with little to no gap in time." When Delta Company returns, its soldiers will find there is no longer a main support battalion in the state of Missouri. It is being replaced by a force provider company and a MP battalion. "With the force provider, we'll be able to go into any Army force provider unit that is activated and fit right in without any glitches or any structural changes," Mickan explained. "We would mirror anything (active Army) has on the ground.

"This would be an easy transition and a faster deployer."

Armaments, like tanks and field artillery, have become "less and less of an asset to fight on the (modern-day) battlefield," Mickan said.

What the military is now fighting is more terrorist types and smaller cells, Mickan said. "They are going to our weak, vulnerable points so we're (focusing) more in the MP, engineer and light maneuverable types of units with the heavy armament."

The changes in personnel and equipment, according to Mickan, will begin soon and continue through September 2006.

The units that are slated to transition in Missouri will stand down in October, Mickan said. "We may see it sooner for some units (and) some will see it later," but October is when the transition begins, he said.

Part of that transition will be "new equipment coming in and old equipment going out," Mickan explained. "There will be a big transition in what we call the property book."

The property books, he said, have to be updated, which is a "major feat in and of itself."

Some pieces will be "cross-level" equipment, Mickan said. "This piece of equipment looks like that piece of equipment and can occupy that piece of equipment's line. There are a lot of things that have to be worked out in the property book section that determines what the unit holds in its motor pool and section areas."

Soldiers Train To Keep The Home Fires Doused

Hernando Today

9 May 2005

By Ray Reyes

SPRING HILL -- The soldiers are home from the wars, but they're preparing to fight other battles here in Florida. Eight Blackhawk helicopter pilots from the Florida **National Guard's** Company B 171st Aviation Battalion, based in Hernando County, will begin training drills Thursday to help fight forest fires statewide. The pilots will use their Blackhawk helicopters during the drills, said Rebecca Courier, the communications coordinator for the Southwest Florida Water Management District (Swiftmud).

The fire fighting sessions will be held on district land in the Green Swamp Wilderness Preserve in Polk County, Courier said. Agents of the Florida Division of Forestry (DOF) will train the Blackhawk pilots. The training is scheduled for May 12-13 or May 18-20 at 9 a.m. due to weather conditions, Courier said. The training will last only one of those days.

Even though the window of opportunity is only a week and a half, DOF Air Tactical Coordinator Bob Duty said the training sessions are basically a refresher course for the pilots. "We've worked with the Florida Army Air Guard since 1984," Duty said. "They've helped us fight fires all over the state."

Lt. Scott Riley, one of the Blackhawk pilots signed up for training, said a tank holding up to 1,000 gallons of water will be fitted underneath their aircraft. Riley's crew will also use devices he calls "Bambi buckets," which hold extra water and look like overturned umbrellas.

"They provide great support for our forest rangers," Duty said of the pilots. "The helicopters help protect structures. They're great for protecting subdivisions." Swiftmud will be conducting controlled burns across 296 acres in the Green Swamp for the soldiers to train, Courier said. Two Blackhawks will be used and a pilot and a two-man crew will fly each helicopter.

Duty said he'll provide ground support via radio. "This is a realistic training session for them," Duty said. "They've had classroom instruction already." Riley said Florida has dodged a hyperactive fire season for at least five years. In 1998, his unit was constantly called to put out forest fires statewide, Riley said. Duty said the 1998 season was especially memorable.

"That was the worst in Florida's modern history," Duty said. "We had approximately 10,000 firefighters and 157 aircraft all over the state fighting fires. It was gruesome." This month's drills will mark the first time the Blackhawk pilots trained on land owned by Swiftmud, Courier said. Seventy soldiers from the Company B 171st Aviation Battalion returned home in late February after serving one year in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Guard In Line For Better Benefits

The Times Online

4 May 2005

Alison Hawkes, Times Capital Bureau

HARRISBURG - Pennsylvania **National Guard** members who are called to active duty would be eligible for a host of new benefits, including help with child care, rent and medical costs, under bills passed Tuesday by the state House.

Lawmakers held off until today the cornerstone of the program, which provides funding for some of the benefits through the good will of taxpayers and private donors. The proposal is to establish a Medical Family Relief Fund, which would accept tax-deductible contributions from corporations and individuals and bring in \$1 donations from a check-off option on state income tax forms.

Lawmakers said they were motivated by stories from Guard members who took significant pay cuts when they were called to duty.

"A person making \$80,000 as an accountant is now in Iraq making \$27,000. There's going to be a disparity," said Rick O'Leary, executive director of the House GOP Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

Those called to duty could apply for food, clothing, shelter and medical care assistance, but must prove that they had a sudden or unexpected loss of income and have unsuccessfully applied for other programs, including those provided by the federal government. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs would determine later whether the assistance would come in the form of grants or loans, according to a spokeswoman for House Republicans.

Of Pennsylvania's 20,000 **National Guard** troops, about three-quarters have been deployed overseas at some time since Sept. 11, 2001, the second-highest number in the nation, behind only Texas. The reason lawmakers focused on the **National Guard** is because it's a military division under the state's jurisdiction, a GOP official said.

But some of the bills also extend to help reservists and soldiers on active duty in small ways. Those wanting to quickly tie the knot, for instance, would be able to get a marriage license with an affidavit instead of appearing in person before a county official to take an oath.

That one came from a heart-tugging story about a couple from Middletown, outside Harrisburg, who wanted to get married but faced a 48-hour leave that fell on a weekend when public offices were closed, according to the bill's sponsor, Rep. John Payne, R-106, Dauphin County.

Among the other benefits are to allow Guard members who work for the state to get an extra 15 days of paid vacation. And for certain categories of military personnel, the

eligibility for college loans would be extended and interest forgiven.

Though the measures enjoyed widespread support, Democrats were quick to point out that they introduced similar bills earlier in the year, but those have been stalled in committees controlled by the GOP.

Republicans retorted that this package of bills had two Democratic sponsors and has always been called a bipartisan effort.

House Passes Bills To Create New National Guard Benefits

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

Associated Press

4 May 2005

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) - Pennsylvania **National Guard** members and their families would receive a wide range of new benefits under several bills passed by the state House of Representatives on Tuesday.

The measures are intended to ensure that "Pennsylvanians heading off to war can at least have an ease of mind that their families and loved ones will be taken care of," House Speaker John M. Perzel, R-Philadelphia, said in a statement. They now go to the Senate for consideration.

One bill would create a special fund to assist guard members and family members who need help paying for food, shelter, clothing, medical care and other necessities due to a sudden or unexpected loss of income.

The House is expected to consider separate legislation Wednesday that would allow income-tax payers to contribute to the fund through a checkoff box on state tax returns, a House Republican spokesman said.

Another bill would expand the amount of annual paid leave for state employees who are on active guard duty from 15 days to 30 days.

"This does not impose anything onto the private sector," said Rep. Robert E. Belfanti Jr., D-Northumberland, who sponsored the bill.

Other bills sent to the Senate would forgive the interest on student loans borrowed by certain active-duty military personnel; provide free fishing licenses for active-duty guard members for one year; and pay for day care for children whose parents are on active military duty.

Rendell supports many of those measures, said his spokeswoman, Kate Philips.

"What he's looking for is a modernization of benefits," she said.

Panel Backs Free Tuition For Some In La. Guard

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

The Advocate (Baton Rouge, Louisiana)

May 5, 2005

Members of the Louisiana **National Guard** who re-enlist for six years would be eligible for free college tuition under a bill approved Wednesday by the House Education Committee.

The measure, House Bill 775, next faces action in the full House. State law already allows members of the Guard to enroll in public colleges and universities without having to pay tuition. The bill would extend that offer to those who re-enlist.

National Guard Brig. Gen. Hunt Downer, a former longtime lawmaker, said the Guard's retention rate is usually about 75 percent. He said the rate now is 60 to 65 percent.

"Our numbers have dropped," Downer said. "This is an additional incentive."

Downer said about 4,000 Guard members took advantage of the offer in the early 1990s and that about 1,700 do so now. He estimated that the bill would boost that by a few hundred Guard members.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco urged the committee to pass the bill. "It will, in a small way, extend our appreciation to those in the Louisiana **National Guard**," Blanco said.

Debate delayed on bill to cut taxes on retirees

It was at least a temporary truce in a political battle over an income tax break for the elderly.

Sen. Robert Adley, D-Benton, agreed to delay debate on his Senate Bill 30, which would raise the maximum exemption on retirement income for married couples from \$6,000 to \$12,000, even if only one is drawing the retirement income.

Adley said the state Revenue Department had granted such exemptions for years. But in the instructions it issued to taxpayers for 2001 returns, the department said that the \$12,000 exemption applies only if both spouses are over 65 and are drawing retirement checks; otherwise the exemption is \$6,000, the same as for individual retirees.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco and her floor leaders have been fighting that and other tax break bills, saying they should be put on hold until the state gets an updated projection of revenue for the 2005-06 fiscal year.

Bill would boost ability of state to collect debts

Legislation that sailed through a House committee would greatly expand Attorney General Charles Foti's authority to collect debts on behalf of state agencies and local governments.

The House Appropriations Committee unanimously approved House Bill 562 by Rep. Bryant Hammett, D-Ferriday, which would let the Attorney General's Office keep 25 percent of any money it collected. That money would go into a special fund, which could be used only to finance more collections.

An amendment was added to ensure that the services would be voluntary, so agencies that already collect their own debts could continue to do so.

House trims higher fee from barbers' licenses

The full House on Wednesday turned away a fee increase for barbers after an impassioned plea from one of their own.

Rep. Elcie Guillory, D-Lake Charles, told fellow lawmakers: "I'm a barber, and I find the license fees are already too high."

House Bill 59 introduced by Rep. Harold L. Ritchie, D-Bogalusa, would have boosted the cost of all manner of fees and licenses that barbers have to pay. The annual license renewal, for instance, would cost \$60 instead of \$40 under HB59. Members of the state Barber Board would have seen their daily expense check rise from \$100 to \$150 had the measure been approved.

Buddy Christ, head of the state Barber Board, had testified in committee that the bill marks the first time in 25 years that the board has voted for a fee increase.

HB59 was killed on a 37-54 vote.

House advances bill on legislators' raises

Certain lawmakers would be able to get pay boosts with a vote of a select legislative panel rather than a vote of the full Legislature, under a bill approved by the House in a 85-11 vote Wednesday.

House Bill 800 would let the joint House/Senate budget committee, which already sets extra compensation for its chairman and vice chairman, be able to set similar salary increases for "other officers" that could be appointed.

HB800's sponsor, House Speaker Joe Salter, D-Florien, said the bill would make administrative changes and give more power to the chairmen of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget, which has 38 members from the 144-member Legislature.

The bill goes next to the Senate.

Compiled by the Capitol News Bureau and the Associated Press

Kentuckian Plans Derby Party For His Military Unit In Iraq

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

May 5, 2005

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - Kentucky native Cam Sutherland, a pharmacist with a medical unit in Iraq, plans to show his mostly Texas comrades how to party for the Kentucky Derby.

Despite the stifling heat and rigors of military life, Sutherland has created a "Derby Central Command" with events such as a 5K race, hat decorating, gurney races and a Derby trivia contest set for race day. He'll join in the traditional singing of "My Old Kentucky Home," mainly by the Texans assigned to the 228th Combat Support Hospital unit.

Sutherland, who grew up in Bardstown and attended the University of Kentucky, is planning the Derby party in Mosul as a way to regain a touch with home, spread the word about Kentucky traditions and add some fun to the relentless demands of a war zone.

As a Kentucky **National Guard** lieutenant colonel, Sutherland has been stationed in Iraq with the Texas-based 228th hospital since December; he hopes to be home for Christmas.

Back home, Sutherland is director of the outpatient pharmacy at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Louisville.

"I think it's his way of keeping in touch with reality," said his wife, Robin Sutherland. "He doesn't give me details of what he's doing in Iraq. ... I don't think he wants to."

Robin Sutherland said she would probably spend Derby Day working in the yard - and thinking of Iraq. "It's pretty constant with me," she said.

In planning the Derby festivities in Iraq, Sutherland asked people back home for help - and the packages began arriving in a few weeks.

Churchill Downs sent five large boxes stuffed with Kentucky Derby souvenirs, prizes and memorabilia. A box of Louisville Slugger baseball-related gear was shipped to Mosul from Hillerich & Bradsby Co.

Daisy Battle, whose husband, Howard, was racing secretary at Keeneland and Churchill Downs, sent a flag and prints of Triple Crown winners done by her husband.

Katheryn Stakely, a friend of the Battles, made up Derby labels that could be put on paper cups. Maker's Mark couldn't send any red-waxed bourbon but did send posters, 300 prime cigars and 300 "Talk Derby To Me" hats.

"I have Derby stuff all over the place, here in the pharmacy, my hooch and another person's hooch," Sutherland recently wrote his family and friends from Iraq. "My packages have become legendary."

John Hassman of Taste of Kentucky sent three cases of Derby Pies and gift baskets and offered to ship free to Iraq anything dropped off at his stores.

Sutherland's sister, Ann Marie Sutherland of Bardstown, appointed herself queen of the Derby Hat Decorating Contest. She rounded up 35 to 40 hats from family and friends, then tossed in all the ribbon, beads, feathers and "little wooden things" she could find to get them properly gussied up for the show.

"I also searched the Internet and sent a bunch of pictures of Derby hats in case those Texans had trouble with the concept of decorating hats," she said.

Friends, former co-workers, retired military personnel and many people Cam Sutherland never met sent him checks, Derby Mardi Gras beads, plastic racehorses, confetti, chocolate horseshoes - and sheet music to "My Old Kentucky Home."

Given the time difference, the Derby events in Iraq will finish before the first race is even run at Churchill Downs.

The 131st running of the Kentucky Derby will go off about 2 a.m. Mosul time. Sutherland won't see it. "I'll be asleep," he said.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Army Reaches Out To Connect Children Of Military Reservists Serving Overseas

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

May 5, 2005

By James Hannah, Associated Press Writer

LONDON, Ohio -- Sixteen-year-old Emily Rohner was scared and worried during the nine months her father was with the **National Guard** in Kosovo. And she had nobody like her to turn to.

"It was hard," Emily said, recalling those many days as she had a bowl of cereal at her kitchen table. "I'm about to cry."

She didn't know anyone her own age who also had a parent like her dad. She didn't have any peer support.

The Army recognizes the isolation that children of military reservists often feel and is working with the 4-H Club - with its nationwide reach - to connect more of them through summer camps, computer labs and potluck dinners. The activities are free.

"It's a very stressful situation to be a suddenly military family," said Theresa Ferrari, extension specialist with 4-H Youth Development in Ohio. "Some kids withdraw."

Emily's father, Staff Sgt. Ralph Rohner, 37, joined the **National Guard** 20 years ago. But until he was sent to Kosovo in 2004 as a peacekeeping policeman, his wife and three daughters didn't think of themselves as a military family. They didn't live near anyone else in their situation.

"One of the problems with the **National Guard** is the members are so spread out in a geographical area it's harder for the kids to link up with each other so they can have an empathetic support group," said Ralph Rohner, who returned home from Kosovo in March.

"Operation: Military Kids" was tested in five states beginning in January 2004 and then nine more last summer. Last month, six more states were added, including Ohio. So far, the states have received a total of \$1.9 million from the Army.

The money is being used to buy portable computer labs outfitted with 15 laptops, cameras, printers and other gear so that children can e-mail and send photos or videos to deployed parents or fellow military kids. States can put the labs in roving vehicles or transport the equipment from one place to another.

Organizers also are going one step further. In Ohio, a 4-H summer camp for children of deployed reservists ages 10 to 15 will be held in southern Ohio's Clinton County in July.

The idea is to create a getaway from the pressures, with canoeing and other typical camp activities, along with time for campers to talk with 4-H counselors and military volunteers about what they're going through.

"Simply knowing there is someone else in that same situation, you don't feel alone anymore," Ferrari said. "We would like to look for ways to help them thrive under that stress."

In Iowa, children of military families have formed a speakers bureau in which they go to gatherings around the state and talk to their counterparts, sharing emotions and tips for coping. Potluck dinners and ice cream socials are used to link military families.

The program helped connect 16-year-old Sarah Thede of Boone, Iowa, with other military kids. Her father was deployed to Afghanistan for nine months in 2003 with the **National Guard**.

"It just helped to talk about it with people," she said.

In Washington state, deployed reservists' children were invited to a Halloween haunted hangar at Fairchild Air Force Base. Another event provided children with cameras so they could make scrapbooks for their deployed parents.

The program also helped train teachers, counselors and after-school providers to be sensitive to the children's situation.

"Every day these kids turn on the TV, another soldier is killed and they have to go in and take a biology test and they don't know if it is their mom or dad," said Chris Gleason, state military liaison for Iowa 4-H.

House Panel Backs Tuition Plan To Promote National Guard Re-Enlistment

The Associated Press

May 4, 2005

By Kevin McGill, Associated Press Writer

BATON ROUGE, La. - A free college tuition program now available for college students who join the Louisiana **National Guard** will be expanded to entice re-enlistment under legislation backed by Gov. Kathleen Blanco and Brig. Gen. Hunt Downer.

Downer, a former House speaker, was back at the Capitol on Wednesday to testify for the bill. He said a re-enlistment incentive is important in a time of war and heightened national security concerns that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Mississippi River - "the back door to the United States" as Downer called it - cuts through the state, lined with ports and petrochemical industries vital to the nation's economy. Coastal pipelines are another national security concern, he said.

All of this is in addition to the guard's responsibility for helping the state cope with various emergencies, Downer reminded the House Education Committee.

"As we approach hurricane season, we all know what we're going to get ready," Downer said.

Eighty percent of the Louisiana **National Guard** has been mobilized since the Sept. 11 attacks, Downer said.

Meanwhile, recruitment has gotten more difficult, not only because the guard competes with other education programs, but also because of a natural reluctance of some to sign up in times of war, Downer said. Retaining experienced guard members is vital, Downer said.

Rep. Regina Barrow's bill, which was approved for House debate by the committee, expands the existing tuition program for guard members to include those who re-enlist. And it makes the program available to those pursuing associate degrees and postgraduate degrees, instead of just bachelor's degrees as is the case under present law.

The estimated cost to the state in lost tuition would be \$3.2 million a year. That did not dissuade committee members.

"It would get people into the education system and get more people into the guard," said Rep. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans.

Barrow, a Baton Rouge Democrat who was just elected last month, takes her bill next to the full House.

Military Policies Applauded

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Connecticut Post (Bridgeport, CT)

May 6, 2005

By Pam Dawkins

While federal law requires employers to give eligible workers deployed with the **National Guard** or Reserves comparable jobs with comparable pay on their return, there are many companies that go above and beyond the call.

The Connecticut Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve partnered with The Business Council of Fairfield County (SACIA) to recognize such Fairfield County-based companies at a breakfast ceremony Thursday at the Dolce Norwalk Center.

The national and state committees actions include helping companies write human resource policies about soldiers and mediating disputes between workers and their employers, said Wayne Travers, a committee member, retired Army guard officer and account supervisor at Cubitt Jacobs & Prosek Communications in Stratford.

Travers said reserve and guard members -- including those who haven't been deployed -- nominate their bosses and companies. Travers reviewed the awards for Connecticut. The recognition is not new, he said, but the committee typically visits companies to present the awards.

Examples of going "above and beyond," he said, include companies that make up the difference between what they pay a worker and what the guard and reserves pay, and those that extend benefits beyond what is legally required.

Another example, he said, is companies that stay in touch with employees while they are deployed, so they don't have to worry about their job when they get back.

Since the Persian Gulf War, and because of the decline in the number of active-duty troops, guard and reserve soldiers are more in demand than ever, Travers said.

"We were -- very gratified" to get the award, said Vince Santilli, a first vice president and growth manager for Fairfield County at People's Bank.

"In some cases, we had to do some juggling" to make up for the 13 employees who have been on military leave the past two years, he said. But, he added, doing so supports the employee and the country.

About 25 percent of the workers at Sikorsky Aircraft in Stratford have military experience, spokesman Ed Steadham said. The company was an award recipient.

Sikorsky has a plaque with the names of the 41 workers who have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. When they are deployed, the company makes up the difference in pay, Steadham said.

That's also the policy at Stew Leonard's, spokeswoman Jill Greenwood said of the company's reserve duty compensation policy. While she said she believes the Norwalk-based grocery chain doesn't have any workers currently serving, employee John Meyer nominated his boss, Joe Vota, for his support while Meyer was deployed. Vota is the

company's director of security.

Other companies recognized include Peppermill Restaurant in Westport, Isqom Technologies Inc. in Newtown, General Electric -- both corporate and consumer finance - Westport Fire Department, Stamford Police Department, SBC in Stratford and COMMONFUND in Wilton.

For information about the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, visit www.esgr.org.

Warriors Surprise Moms With Cards; Company's Generosity Makes It Happen

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Sun Herald.com

9 May 2005

By Hohlbrook Mohr

JACKSON - Thousands of worried mothers received Mother's Day cards from sons and daughters stationed in Iraq in time for Sunday's holiday thanks to a Mississippi military support group and the generosity of a greeting card company.

About 3,900 greeting cards were sent by Paramount Cards Inc., without mention of the sender's name, to members of the 155th Brigade Combat Team.

The combat team is composed of 3,500 Mississippi Guard soldiers with others from Arkansas and Vermont and is attached to the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force, which is made up of troops from across the country. The 155th operates in the Karbala, Najaf and Babil provinces of Iraq. The unit deployed in January.

Sgt. 1st Class Kevin Kelly, 36, of Union, told The Associated Press in an e-mail from Iraq that many of the soldiers were able to get cards to send both their wives and mothers.

"It was like out of the blue and truly a blessing," Kelly said. "It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing, you can miss a birthday, anniversary or something like that, but being able to send a Mother's Day card to your wife and mother really makes you feel good inside."

Howard Lord, a military veteran and the print manager for the Rhode Island company that sent the cards, said he did so after a request by a family support group in Senatobia. Lord said his time in the Navy gave him a firsthand lesson in the importance of mail between soldiers and their families as they deal with long separations.

"I support everything the soldiers do, wherever they are," Lord said. "Any small help we can give, we will."

While Lord played down the gesture, Kelly said the cards were a welcome surprise for those serving in Iraq. He said many of the soldiers had been sending money with comrades on missions to Baghdad in unsuccessful attempts to obtain cards for Mother's Day. The donation from Paramount Card changed that.

"I was able to send one to my wife, my wife (from my son), my mother, and my mother-in-law who is in Germany," Kelly said. "She is German and can't speak English, so I guess it will be the thought that counts."

Tammy Vinzant, the secretary for the Senatobia Family Readiness Group that requested the cards, said "mothers all over Mississippi, as well as moms of the New Jersey, Arkansas, Oklahoma and California troops, would be shocked and pleased to find a card from their soldier."

She said Sheila Biffle, the Family Readiness Group's treasurer, did the footwork.

"But she is not one to take credit for anything," Vinzant said. "Even though her husband is no longer in the Guard, she serves as the treasurer of our (group) and continues to do whatever she can to support our soldiers and their families."

Vinzant said Biffle contacted numerous major greeting card companies "who did not give her the time of day."

Then she found Lord, who jumped at the opportunity. The soldiers are thankful for it.

"We were able to give out one card to all single soldiers and two to married soldiers. The reasoning behind this was that the married soldiers could send their wives one," Kelly said. "We all know what a special day it is and especially for us over here that have small kids that really can't go out and buy cards and such."

Biffle says that while she acted for the soldiers and their families, several mothers had e-mailed her personally or shared their feelings in messages posted on a Web site dedicated to the 150th Combat Engineer Battalion.

Rebecca McCormick of Hot Springs, Ark., returned home from a trip to find a letter from Iraq addressed in the handwriting of her son, Sgt. Wayne West, 21, with the 150th Combat Engineers.

She said often it's the wives and girlfriends who hear from the soldiers because of the limited time they have to communicate.

"We're the ones who birthed them and, like I told Wayne, no matter how old they get, they are still our babies," McCormick said.

She said the work by Biffle and the generosity of the card company means a lot to families.

"A line on e-mail or a bouquet of flowers are good, but I want you to write something. All these cards with postmarks from Iraq and addressed in the handwriting of our soldiers just makes us cry," McCormick said.

Glenda Brown of Union received her card last weekend and decided to read it early.

"I thought about waiting but I didn't," Brown said. "We get a lot of e-mails but the stuff they write by hand is a lot nicer.

"And what makes this even sweeter is knowing that people have gone out of their way and thought about me and thought about my son," said Brown, whose 20-year-old son, Spc. Michael Brown is with a unit of the 150th out of Carthage.

Lt. Col. Tim Powell, a spokesman for the Mississippi **National Guard**, said providing

soldiers with the cards to send back home "was certainly a wonderful gesture by Paramount. We really appreciate that support of our men and women supporting the fight in Iraq."

End

[Back to Table of Contents](#)