

Always Ready – Always There!

Story and photos by Maj. Scott Bell, S.C. National Guard Historian

Nearly seven years ago, Sept. 11, 2001, became a day of infamy for the grandsons and granddaughters of America's "Greatest Generation." Like their grandparents, who answered our nation's call following another day of infamy -- Dec. 7, 1941, today's next greatest generation of heroes is proving they too are always ready – always there to fight the enemies of liberty.

Last month, the people of South Carolina welcomed home 1,600 S.C. National Guard Soldiers from the 218th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) who were serving in Afghanistan the past year. We also welcomed home another 200 Guardsmen from the 132nd Military Police Company, who have been fighting in Iraq since last May. In total, more than 8,500 Citizen-Soldiers have been called up from the S.C. National Guard to help fight our nation's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Five hundred more will deploy this year to serve overseas.

Interestingly, many of those who recently came home were also ordered to active duty during the aftermath of 9-11. They guarded key military and government installations throughout the United States. These men and women helped bring calm to a suffering nation mourning the loss of nearly 3,000. Like the Greatest Generation, they continue steadfastly serving for many reasons, but one thing remains constant – their patriotic desire to fight and win America's wars to preserve for their grandchildren our founders' dream of liberty. As they do so, they spread freedom to those who have never known it. They believe Iraqis and Afghans will one day enjoy similar freedoms as the Germans and Japanese experienced following World War II.

Our S.C. Citizen-Soldiers' efforts are bearing much fruit in their efforts to spread the seeds of liberty in Afghanistan and Iraq. The latest example of this is the list of incredible accomplishments of those who recently returned home to South Carolina. Before the unit arrived in Afghanistan last year, the Afghan National Police (ANP) was being destroyed by Taliban forces. Within three months after arriving in Afghanistan, the 218th BCT was able to turn things around by vastly enhancing and expanding training and mentoring programs which teamed S.C. Soldiers with ANP and Afghan National Army (ANA) members in over 240 locations around Afghanistan. This effort paid off in a seven-fold decrease of Afghan casualties and a crushing victory over the Taliban during the enemy's first-ever threatening offense.

During the past year, 218th BCT forces also increased ANA numbers by 35 percent. S.C. troops helped the ANA accomplish several firsts during the year including: engaging Anti-Government Forces throughout the winter; training 20 new units to lead missions from planning through execution and sustaining; helping several battalions and two brigades become validated by the Army as



Maj. Gen. Stanhope S. Spears, Adjutant General of S.C. reviews the 2008 S.C. Hurricane Guide with John A. Shuler, Deputy Adjutant General of State Operations. The S.C. Military Department's Emergency Management Division provides the annual hurricane guides to S.C. citizens who live east of Columbia. The guides are distributed through newspapers as well as county and state government offices.

independent; reducing the absent without leave rate from 18 percent to less than 8 percent; graduating 29,000-plus recruits from Basic Warrior Training; more than doubling the re-enlistment rate from 20 percent to over 55 percent; increasing the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps from 30 percent to 80 percent (7,000 NCOs); and graduating 700 soldiers from the Officer Candidate Course.

Similar firsts were achieved with the ANP. For the first time, 218th BCT forces mentored the police at the district level. They tripled the mentor requirement with no additional resources by assigning Police Mentoring Teams to live in the ANP district centers. This gave them the ability to provide 24/7 mentor coverage for the Police. They instituted Focused District Development where Soldiers could train an entire district at a regional training center. S.C. troops also completed a comprehensive Police census that was accepted by the international community. They also established a much needed communication network linking Joint Provincial Coordination Centers all the way up to the national level.

The 218th Brigade Combat Team accomplished these operational successes while also helping ANA and ANP personnel win the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan. Over \$12 million in Commander's Emergency Response Programs monies were utilized to build schools, hospitals, etc. Thanks to the generosity of the people of South Carolina and others throughout our nation, the unit provided over 300 tons of critically needed food, clothing and emergency supplies. Additionally, the unit's medical personnel conducted over 200 medical assistance missions to help bring much needed medical care to citizens living in austere areas of the country.

The results of these efforts have had a tremendous impact on the morale of the people in this fledgling democracy. For the first time, the ANA is leading the fight in every Region. Thirteen brigades of ANA will be over 100 percent strength this summer. The ANP has gone from losing 200 police officers per month to less than 30 casualties per month. They are at 96 percent strength (79,000). For the first time, the ANP held their district centers throughout the winter. Amazingly, even though the 218th BCT was the most engaged unit in Afghanistan, their losses were proportionally lower than the country average.

"It often surprises a lot of people, who are unfamiliar with the S.C. National Guard, to know the accomplishments of the 218th Brigade Combat Team are typical of our Citizen-Soldiers here in South Carolina," said Maj. Gen. Stanhope S. Spears, Adjutant General of S.C. Spears feels S.C. Guardsmen provide a key component to victory in Iraq and Afghanistan – a broad spectrum of military, professional and educational expertise necessary in the development of a nation. As an example of this belief, he points to the vast diversity within the 218th BCT itself. "The unit is led by a very successful civilian CEO. The ranks are filled with doctors, lawyers, bankers, small business owners, police officers, teachers, electricians, engineers, government leaders, plumbers, logistics specialists, etc. You name it and the 218th has probably got it," said Spears. He feels we are winning the Global War on Terror because the people our Citizen-Soldiers are helping, mentoring and teaching now have hope for a better tomorrow. "I can see their morale improving each time I visit both countries. They now see their lives getting better each day as they take on more and more of the responsibility of self-governance and self-preservation," said Spears.

As the budding flower of liberty continues to grow in the new democracies of Iraq and Afghanistan, the S.C. National Guard continues to grow as well. This growth has an economic impact on every county in the state. Already one of the largest employers in the state with 12,486 employees, the S.C. National Guard will gain an additional 800 new Citizen-Soldiers as a result of the Army's on-going transformation process into highly mobile, modular combat units. These new Soldiers will be added to the state's roles by the end of 2009. Of the current full-time workforce of 1,954 state, federal and active guard and reserve (AGR) employees, there are only 33 state employees, or 1.6 percent of the staff who are 100 percent funded by South Carolina. The 100 percent federally funded staff assigned has an annual federal payroll of just over \$119 million. This number will grow as more staff is hired to support the 800 new Soldiers. Additionally, the payroll of the traditional Citizen-Soldier which currently adds \$42 million to the economy of S.C will also grow.

As the Guard's numbers increase so do its facility needs. Currently, the headquarters for the S.C. National Guard is located at One National Guard Road in Columbia from which it maintains 68 armories throughout the state valued in excess of \$300 million, two Army National Guard training installations and a McEntire Joint National Guard Base in Eastover for both Army and Air operations. The Guard's new \$31 million, 130,000 square-foot Charleston Readiness Center at The Citadel, The Military College of S.C. will be completed this August. This cooperative-use facility will house the new headquarters for the 218th BCT along with classrooms for cadets of the school. Other projects projected to be completed by the end of 2009 include: a \$3.1 million 6,400 square-foot addition to the Beaufort Readiness Center; a \$25 million 73,000 square-foot hangar at McEntire; and a \$40 million 82,000 square-foot Army Aviation Support Facility to be constructed at Donaldson Center, Greenville, S.C.

"The S.C. National Guard continues to grow and expand because we've got the best Citizen-Soldiers in the country," said Spears. Per-capita, S.C. ranks among the top-ten of states called upon by the Department of Defense to support the Global War on Terrorism. "Besides the federal investment our state receives from a robust National Guard, the real benefit is our enhanced ability to better support the people of South Carolina in an emergency," said Spears. These capabilities were recently showcased during the Vigilant Guard exercise held in Beaufort, S.C. in April. More than 3,000 Guardsmen worked jointly with Beaufort County, state and federal first-responders in a mock earthquake scenario which notionally devastates Beaufort County. The Guard utilized new technologies such as the Joint Incident Site Communications Capability which can be deployed anywhere in the state within a couple of hours to provide emergency communications for first-responders, and new equipment such as the CH-47 Chinook helicopter to provide medical evacuation and disaster relief to "victims" in Beaufort County. Spears calls the exercise "a complete success," and believes it demonstrated how the S.C. National Guard can accomplish its state mission while at the same time helping to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Our next greatest generation of heroes, continue to epitomize the phrase 'Always ready – Always there,'" said Spears.