



VFA's Preliminary Findings: The Pennsylvania National Guard

October 27, 2008 (revised edition)

Introduction

The Citizen Soldiers (and Airmen and Airwomen) of the Pennsylvania National Guard have borne a disproportionate share of the burden of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As presidential and congressional candidates debate America's future role in Iraq and Afghanistan, Veterans for America (VFA) calls on them to address the strains that our wars are placing on our National Guard, their families, and their communities.

With 20,000 members, the Pennsylvania National Guard is among the largest Guard forces in the United States. In keeping with its size and great combat exposure, the Pennsylvania National Guard has lost more members in support of the Global War on Terrorism than any other state: forty-three deaths since September 11, 2001.¹ In addition to their past sacrifices, the Pennsylvania National Guard is in the early stages of its largest deployment since the Korean War, with more than 5,000 members of the Pennsylvania National Guard scheduled to be deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom within the next two years.

VFA's preliminary findings show that the Pennsylvania National Guard is currently—and will continue to remain for the foreseeable future—under tremendous pressure. VFA's preliminary findings are based upon submissions to VFA's online Wounded Warrior Registry, field visits to speak with National Guard members, officials, and others throughout the state, hundreds of hours of research, and dozens of calls and e-mails to reach out to and solicit feedback from parties knowledgeable regarding the pressing needs of the Pennsylvania National Guard.

VFA finds that the Pennsylvania National Guard has made great strides in the recent years to improve the programs, personnel, and funding necessary to care for returning Guard members and their families—as well as those preparing to deploy for the first time or again. Pennsylvania is fortunate that Governor Edward G. Rendell; Major General Jessica L. Wright, the state's adjutant general; and its congressional delegation—including Congressmen John P. Murtha, Christopher P. Carney, Phil English, and Patrick J. Murphy—are keenly aware of the great strains that have been placed on the Pennsylvania National Guard and the steps that need to be taken to address these issues.

Evidence of Strain: Challenges Created

The heavy use of the Pennsylvania National Guard post-9/11 has created many strains and challenges for Pennsylvania National Guard members and their families. Many of these strains and challenges are not unique to Pennsylvania. That said, they are compounded by the relatively large size of the state's National Guard and the number of

units scheduled to return home in the coming years. Below is a list of six prominent strains and challenges:

1. Some Pennsylvania National Guard members returning from the battlefield stresses of Iraq and/or Afghanistan are experiencing great difficulty readjusting to their civilian lives. Some Pennsylvania Army National Guard units have been deployed abroad three times since September 11 and with each successive deployment, the readjustment process becomes more difficult. Two prominent stresses noted by VFA are marital and family discord. In addition, some Guard members do not feel adequately prepared for the domestic consequences that their loved ones will face when they are deployed. As one Pennsylvania National Guard Captain told VFA: "The deployments are announced so fast, and people are going before there's even a chance to establish Family Readiness Groups."
2. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other post-deployment readjustment issues appear prevalent among returning Pennsylvania National Guard members. (In June 2007, the Department of Defense reported that almost half of the members of the National Guard and Reserves who had served in Iraq and/or Afghanistan suffer considerable post-combat psychological problems.²) The commanders of almost all Pennsylvania National Guard units have made face-to-face screening for PTSD during the Post-Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA) phase (90 to 180 days after deployment) a top priority. Nevertheless, VFA has learned of some cases of apparent PTSD misdiagnosis, and numerous instances of Guard members not reporting PTSD symptoms after they return home because, among other reasons, they want to remain eligible for future deployments, and/or they want to ensure that they will retain their civilian job—especially if they are police, correctional, or parole officers.
3. Some small businesses are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to retain the same position vacated by employee(s) who are deployed with the National Guard. In addition, Veterans Affairs and congressional staffers reported instances of some businesses avoiding hiring Guard members because of the great likelihood that they will be deployed abroad, and the possibility that they could “freak out” on the job. Both of these actions are a clear violation of Pennsylvania and federal law. That said, a poor economy compounded by repeated deployments creates great stresses for small business owners and their employees.
4. The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and repeated deployment of the Pennsylvania National Guard have also reduced the overall readiness of some units. The equipment of many units has been shipped overseas with no expectation that it will ever be returned to the state. VFA has also learned that the state-side equipment of almost all units is rated C-4, or unready for combat. For instance, in 2007, the state’s Department of Military and Veterans Affairs warned that “[t]he Pennsylvania Army National Guard is critically short of High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (Humvees),” with them having only 37% of the total “required for federal and state mission accomplishment.”³ In addition,

according to the state's most recent budget, less than two-thirds of the state's armories and field sites were rated "adequate."⁴ These shortfalls seriously hamper domestic emergency preparedness should the Pennsylvania National Guard be needed in a crisis situation, such as its response to the February 2007 ice storms that crippled much of the state's interstate highway system.⁵

5. For some Pennsylvania National Guard members, it is a long and difficult process to have their service-connected disability ratings and/or discharge records challenged and corrected. As a practical matter, this has made it difficult for some National Guard members to get access to certain levels of health care, benefits, or pensions. VFA was told of Soldiers who had received other-than-honorable-conditions discharges for behavior believed to be linked to PTSD and/or other post-deployment readjustment issues. National Guard members receive their Certificate of Release or Discharge (called DD Form 214) upon retiring, or being released or discharged from active-duty service. If their DD Form 214 lists other-than-honorable-conditions for their discharge, former Guard members are unable to receive VA-funded counseling and other necessary services. Correcting a DD Form 214 discharge record requires the completion of a DD Form 215, which can take eight to sixteen months.⁶
6. Outreach to Pennsylvania's 1.3 million veterans is good but will require additional improvements in the near future. Despite both pre- and post-deployment briefings and follow-up letters mailed to state-side Pennsylvania Guard members, most Guard members and their families are not fully aware of their benefits and/or rights. Many VA and National Guard representatives with whom VFA spoke noted the pressing need for more funding and personnel to improve outreach efforts to National Guard members post-deployment.

As a consequence of these persistent problems and large numbers of Pennsylvania National Guard members scheduled to deploy within the next two years, in a subsequent final report, VFA will recommend a number of specific proposals to close the gap between the pressing needs created by these deployments and services available. To convey comments and/or questions, please contact Adrienne Willis, Co-Director of VFA's National Guard Program, at: 202-557-7509, or awillis@veteransforamerica.org.

Questions that Deserve Answers: Pennsylvania National Guard

Every presidential candidate and their surrogates campaigning in Pennsylvania, along with candidates for other federal or state offices, should answer a number of questions regarding how their leadership would relieve the great strain placed on the Pennsylvania National Guard. Below are nine such questions:

1. How will your plans for Iraq and Afghanistan relieve the incredible strain placed on members of the Pennsylvania National Guard?⁷

2. Traditional Army policy requires that the National Guard be given 5 years at home for every year deployed. Since September 11th, 2001, this has not been the case for many Pennsylvania Guard members. What is the minimum period of dwell time Pennsylvania National Guard members should receive between overseas deployments in order to ensure the health and readiness of the force? Can you assure the people of Pennsylvania that the servicemembers of the Pennsylvania National Guard and their families are receiving adequate dwell time to reunite, readjust, and heal?
3. What are your plans for significantly improving outreach to Pennsylvania National Guard members and their families regarding the benefits, programs, and services available to them during and after a deployment?
4. Should Pennsylvania conduct a comprehensive, scientific study of the pre- and post-deployment needs of Pennsylvania National Guard members who have deployed since September 11, 2001, and their families?
5. Are you in favor of a comprehensive, independently conducted study of the impact that Pennsylvania National Guard deployments have had on the economic welfare of their communities, especially small businesses?
6. What is your plan for improving the Pennsylvania National Guard's equipment, both in terms of its quantity and condition for possible rapid-response to domestic emergencies?
7. What are your plans to streamline the process by which DD Form 214's can be challenged and/or corrected by National Guard members who believe they were incorrectly discharged?
8. What do you believe is required from the federal government in order to bolster existing programs for servicemembers and their families and to establish new programs such as the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program?
9. What changes are necessary to improve coordination between the Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and National Guard Headquarters across the country?⁸

¹ Thirty-two Pennsylvania National Guard members were killed in combat, while the other eleven were non-combat related fatalities. Interview with National Guard Public Affairs Official, October 22, 2008.

² Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, "An Achievable Vision: Report of the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health," June 2007, p. ES-2.

³ Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, *Federal Legislative Priorities: Federal Fiscal Year 2008*, September 2007.

⁴ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Governor's 2008-2009 Executive Budget*, February 2008, p. E28.6.

⁵ James Lee Witt Associates, *Independent Report on the Mid-February 2007 Winter Storm Response for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, March 27, 2007.

⁶ Department of the Army, Army Regulation 635-200, *Active Duty Enlisted Administrative Separations*, June 6, 2005, pp. 41-46. For the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs overview of the DD214/DD215 procedures see: <http://www.milvet.state.pa.us/DMVA/207.htm>

⁷ Half of the veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are from either the National Guard or the Reserves. In addition, roughly half of the Soldiers scheduled to deploy to Iraq between now and the end of President Bush's term in office are from these part-time branches of the military.

⁸ An April 2008 recent study by the Government Accountability Office, Congress' nonpartisan watchdog, found that NORTHCOM had given Adjutant Generals minimal involvement in the development of national defense and civil support plans, that NORTHCOM was unfamiliar with state emergency response plans, and that the roles and responsibilities of NORTHCOM and state National Guard Headquarters were often unclear, as were the procedures through which the two interacted.