PRAIRIE SOLDIER SPECIAL FEATURE

PATRIOTS in Stripes

The Nebraska Army National Guard simply couldn't do its mission without the hundreds of professional noncommissioned officers that make up its ranks. From the command sergeants major who are responsible for looking out for the morale and welfare of their troops, to the supply sergeants who makes sure that Soldiers have the equipment they need, to the medical sergeants who maintain Soldiers' health and treat their wounds, to the drill sergeants who ensure that Soldiers start their careers on the right foot, the Nebraska Army National Guard depends on the quality and professionalism of its NCOs to make sure that the hard jobs get done right the first time. They literally are the backbone of the Army.

As part of the Army's continuing Year of the NCO observance, the Prairie Soldier spotlights the work that Nebraska Army National Guard NCOs do on a daily basis to ensure that the Nebraska Army National Guard is ready, trained and capable to do its mission.

Command sergeant major representing Nebraska's enlisted men, women daily

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

When it comes to describing what Richard Burch does for the Nebraska Army National Guard, on the face of it, it's really quite simple.

As the state command sergeant major, Burch is the principal advisor to the adjutant general on all issues relating to the state's enlisted force. That means that if it matters to Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers, it matters to Burch.

Now, when it comes to describing *how* Burch accomplishes this important mission… well, mere words seem somewhat inadequate. That's because the issues that Burch deals with on a daily basis are as varied as the enlisted force he represents in the Nebraska National Guard.

For example, one day Burch might be helping the adjutant general and other senior state leaders develop plans for a particular operation or problem. On another, he might be meeting with other senior enlisted leaders, providing guidance to them so that they can help meet the state's strategic goals.

On another, he might be outfitted in field gear as he talks with deploying Soldiers at a place like Fort Hood, Texas. On another, he might be meeting with Soldiers' families or employers, helping them better understand and overcome the challenges the Global War on Terrorism has brought with it.

There are even times when he might be meeting with civilian and foreign military leaders in order to help them better understand the incredible capabilities that the U.S. NCO Corps provides to the United States.

According to Burch, a 33-year Nebraska Army National Guard veteran, it's this flexibility to tailor his work schedule to best meet the daily and long-term challenges that he most enjoys about the job he's held since March 2007.

"In this job you can be as busy as you want to be," said Burch recently as he took a few minutes to catch up on e-mails in his office that's within voice distance of the adjutant general's desk in the state headquarters building in Lincoln, Neb. "The more things that you are involved in, the more things that you can hopefully positively influence."

Burch said being flexible is the key to being a successful command sergeant major because one simply can't always predict the issues that will crop up during the course of a day or night.

"Sometimes you get some stuff that's tough to deal with," he said. "The number of issues I tend to deal with on a daily, weekly, monthly basis seems to be a little bit more than what I'd anticipated it to be, but then reflecting back on the number of Soldiers and Airmen that we're dealing with in the state, maybe it isn't that many."

"But there's always something. There's always a hot button. There's always a Soldier, a family member, an employer out there that has questions and 99 percent of the time they're valid questions," he said. "It's just a matter of educating the force, educating our families and educating our employers on how the Guard operates and the restraints that we have to operate under."

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Burch
Hometown: Hastings, Neb.
Job Title: State Command Sergeant Major, Lincoln, Neb.
Years of Service: 33
Family: Wife: Sandy; Daughters: Jennifer (Umana,) Jody; Son-in-Law: Erick Umana; Grandchildren: Alex, Abby

Photo by Maj. Kevin Hynes

Representing The State's Soldiers: Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Burch (right) talks with Sgt. Timothy Greiner, 313th Medical Company (Ground Ambulance,) Nov. 13, at Fort Hood, Texas. As the state command sergeant major, Burch is responsible for representing the state's enlisted Soldiers at the highest levels of the Nebraska National Guard.

According to Burch, the goal of becoming the state's senior enlisted Soldier was something that evolved over time during his military career.

"I was the readiness NCO and first sergeant out in Company D, 2-134th Infantry, in Hastings and I wanted to be the operations sergeant for the second infantry battalion," he said. "So, I had to move to Lincoln in order for that to happen."

"After moving to Lincoln and taking that position on, I enrolled in the Sergeants Major Academy and it was about that time that I set my sights on the state (command sergeant major) position," he added.

The reason, Burch said, was the realization that a person's ability to impact Soldiers in real, meaningful ways increases the higher one goes up the NCO leadership ladder.

"As I worked my way up from company to battalion, I could see at the battalion-level how much more of a broad reaching impact I could have on Soldiers in that battalion," said Burch.

"And I realized that at the state (command sergeant major) level, you could have an even broader impact. And that is part of what we do as leaders… we try to challenge ourselves."

After being selected to be the state command sergeant major by then-Maj. Gen. Roger P. Lempke, Burch said he was surprised at all the job entailed.

"I think maybe the biggest eye-opener was the level at which you operate (as the state command sergeant major,)" said Burch. "I'd never really taken that strategic look at the Nebraska National Guard and everything that goes into that line unit out there in North Platte, Hastings or wherever it might be… the impacts on that unit's ability to do what it needs to do and all the different pieces that have to come together. Everything from paying the water bill to new construction to Soldier training to collective training to personnel management, equipment distribution and all those logistic functions… there's so many things out there you can influence."

The ability of individual NCOs to influence operations is probably the biggest change Burch said he's seen over his career. In fact, just as little as 10 years ago sergeants were mostly employed as team leaders and squad leaders where they were responsible for accomplishing a piece of a much larger mission, Burch said.

See BURCH on 16.

Convoy commander tested daily in Iraq

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

Growing up in Kearney, Neb., Ryan Jeffries used to stare at a painting entitled "Reflections" that hung in his family's home.

In it, an aged Vietnam vet stands, head bowed, next to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., with his hand outstretched, touching the reflection of fallen comrades who, like the veteran, stretch out their hands to give comfort to their mourning friend.

The painting was purchased by Jeffries' stepfather, a Vietnam veteran, when Jeffries was just 13 years old. And even though he didn't understand the depth of feelings that painting conveyed to his step dad, the youngster still spent hours staring at the painting, trying to pull meaning from canvas.

"I was too young to understand combat and loss, but through the painting's power I was able to get a glimpse of what my father, stepfather, grandfathers and a long line of fine Americans before them had sacrificed in defense of this great nation," Jeffries recently wrote in a Veterans' Day editorial for the *Kearney Hub* newspaper.

Today Jeffries is a staff sergeant in Kearney's 1195th Transportation Company, which is currently completing a year-long tour at Camp Victory, Iraq, located on the outskirts of Baghdad. A veteran of two other deployments to Iraq, Jeffries now understands the painting's poignancy in ways he never could as a young boy.

"As a combat veteran myself, I have come to understand that the real heroes are the ones who never came home, those who are buried in foreign lands so that this country could remain free," wrote Jeffries, a 1993 graduate of Kearney High School who spent eight years as an active Marine, serving as an artilleryman and U.S. Embassy guard in South Africa, Hungary and Belarus. He joined the Georgia Army National Guard as a fire direction control sergeant in 2002 and was deployed to Iraq twice before transferring back to Nebraska and the 1195th Trans. Co. in September 2008.

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Staff Sgt. Ryan Jeffries
Hometown: Kearney, Neb.
Job Title: Squad Leader, Convoy Commander, Kearney, Neb.
Years of Service: 17
Family: Single

Photo by Spc. Fabian Andalbo

Iraq Inspection: Staff Sgt. Ryan Jeffries (right) conducts a pre-combat inspection of Sgt. Justin Harmin's equipment prior to a 1195th Transportation Company convoy mission to Baghdad, Iraq.

Within a few short months after transferring into the 1195th Trans. Co., Jeffries learned that he would most likely deploy back to Iraq for a third time.

See COMMANDER on 16.

New job gives Soldier responsibility for others' lives

■*Nebraska Army Guard sergeant changes unit in pursuit of dream; realizes new job brings new responsibilities*

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

For almost as long as he's worn a uniform, Sgt. Jeremy S. Borrell had one simple dream: to jump out of airplanes.

However, since joining the Nebraska Army National Guard as a member of Troop A, 1-167th Cavalry, in December 2002, the opportunity seemed to elude him at every turn.

So, when the opportunity came to enlist in a newly forming airborne rigger unit in Seward, the 25-year-old Grand Island native said he literally "jumped" at the chance.

"Initially, the first thing that jumped out at me was the opportunity to go to airborne school," said Borrell, an airdrop sergeant with Detachment 2, 165th Quartermaster Company (Light Air Supply.) "It was something that I looked forward to most of my military career."

However, since joining the unit and attending the parachute rigger course at Fort Lee, Va., earlier this year, Borrell said he now understands that being a rigger means much more than simply packing parachutes and getting to jump out of an airplane a couple times a year. Much, much more, he adds.

"One of the great things about being in our unit is we get to do a unique job within the military – being able to not only pack parachutes for other jumpers, but frequently jump ourselves to maintain our level of proficiency and provide safety for all the other individuals who use our parachutes," said Borrell.

That means that every time Borrell and his fellow riggers prepare personnel or cargo parachutes, they are literally holding the life of another Soldier in their hands.

"The level of responsibility is very high and we always try to achieve the highest level of responsibility because with the parachute system for personnel, it's a life-saving device," said Borrell. "If it isn't for that parachute, (the jumper) is going to have a bad jump and all kinds of different things can happen."

Photo by Maj. Kevin Hynes

On The Drop Zone: Sgt. Jeremy S. Borrell, an airdrop sergeant with Seward's Detachment 2, 165th Quartermaster Company (Light Air Supply,) poses for a photograph after successfully completing an airborne jump at Drop Zone Husker near Mead, Neb.

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Sgt. Jeremy S. Borrell
Hometown: Grand Island, Neb.
Job Title: Airdrop sergeant, Seward, Neb.
Years of Service: 7
Family: Single

It's a level of responsibility that Borrell has already been exposed to on numerous occasions going back to his first Nebraska Army Guard unit.

Shortly after joining the Guard, Borrell was mobilized for Operation Iraqi Freedom in early 2005, serving a year in Iraq as a member of the brigade commander's security detachment. While in Iraq Borrell frequently manned a Mk-19 automatic grenade launcher or M-249 light machine gun mounted atop one of his unit's armored Humvees.

It was an important and potentially deadly mission.

Borrell said he learned a lot about leadership by simply watching the senior noncommissioned officers within his unit.

"I had the opportunity during my time with Alpha Troop to serve under some of the finest NCOs that I've seen in the military and I try to live out the things that they instilled upon me early on in those years," said Borrell, who pinned on his own sergeant's stripes just two months ago.

"I really hope that someday my lower enlisted Soldiers will be able to take the lessons that I've taught them and use them in their own leadership."

One of the most important lessons, said Borrell, is setting a professional example.

"One of the most important traits that a leader has to have is to set an example," he said. "Lead as you expect your Soldiers to follow. If you can't perform the task, you shouldn't expect your Soldiers to perform it."

"I'm a firm believer that if I ask you to do it, I had very much (better) be able to do it myself," he added.

That's particularly important in a unit like the 165th, said Borrell.

"The NCO has a really important role in the aerial delivery and rigging in general," he said. "It's important for us to not only ensure that our lower enlisted are performing tasks to standard, but to also mentor them and pass on everything that we've learned not only as Soldiers in the rigging field, but also the things that I've picked up my entire career in the military."

As the only rigging unit in the Nebraska Army Guard, Det. 2, 165th QM Co. is responsible for providing parachutes for fellow paratroopers in the 165th SOFSC and Company C, 1-134th Infantry (Long Range Surveillance.)

They're also responsible for preparing cargo for delivery to forward operating bases using cargo parachutes, more commonly referred to as G-14s.

As one of several airdrop sergeants assigned to the aerial delivery section, Borrell is responsible for preparing the cargo for drops, ensuring that the G-14 parachutes are packed correctly and that the parachutes are correctly rigged onto the cargo so that the pallets exit the aircraft correctly and the parachutes deploy in such a way as to deliver the packages safely to the ground.

Borrell said it's a job he's quickly learned to love.

"The aerial delivery side is something that I really enjoy," he said. "Getting to watch the containers go out the back of the aircraft and have successful parachute deployments is something that's exciting to watch."

Borrell said he also understands that it's a skill that's in high demand today in places like Afghanistan.

"They're using a ton in theater," said Borrell. "That's how all of the forward operating bases are getting resupplied. With the lack of (main supply routes) that run through Afghanistan and a lack of safety on those MSRs, this is huge right now."

"Riggers are getting lots of opportunities to make a very large impact on what's going on over there. And it's exciting to be a part of that," he added.

"I look forward to the opportunity at some point in my military career to be able to utilize my skill downrange."

Photo by Maj. Kevin Hynes

On the Road: Sgt. 1st Class Jason Roberts takes a break during a June convoy operation to Camp Rapid, S.D., where his unit, Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 126th Chemical Battalion, was scheduled to conduct its annual training during a rainy week in the Black Hills. Roberts serves as the detachment sergeant for the Omaha-based unit.

Sergeant puts teaching to test

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

For four years Sgt. 1st Class Jason Roberts worked hard to give future noncommissioned office the tools they needed to be successful in their next military assignments.

Serving as a Warrior Leaders Course instructor at Camp Ashland, Roberts knew the job he was doing was extremely important. He was helping build tomorrow's leaders.

Roberts now is putting the skills he taught to specialists and newly promoted sergeants to the test as the detachment sergeant for Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 126th Chemical Battalion.

A member of the Nebraska Army National Guard since 1992, Roberts became the senior enlisted leader of the Omaha-based detachment earlier this year. Since then, Roberts said, he's been working hard to learn his new job while using the leadership techniques he helped teach others.

"It's kind of a big switch compared to what I'm used to," said Roberts earlier this summer during a convoy to his unit's annual training at Camp Rapid, S.D., just three months into his new assignment. "I've been here going on month number three… it's a big shock."

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Roberts
Hometown: Fremont, Neb.
Job Title: Detachment Sergeant, Omaha, Neb.
Years of Service: 17
Family: Wife: Kelly; Children: Kelsey, Sydney, Haley, Courtney

As the detachment sergeant, Roberts is essentially the acting first sergeant for the detachment, which is too small to have a first sergeant of its own.

That means he's responsible for providing

See DETACHMENT SERGEANT on 16.

Maintenance sergeant keeps focus on developing Soldiers

By Mark Roland
Unit Public Affairs Representative

Michael Rudebusch started his military career as a TOW (Tube, Optically, Wire) and Dragon Missile maintenance technician in the Nebraska Army National Guard's Company B (Maintenance), 67th Forward Support Battalion.

While there, he spent many years supporting Soldiers of the 67th Infantry Brigade during annual training periods at Fort Carson, Colo.

After utilizing his educational benefits and graduating from Southeast Community College, Rudebusch found it difficult to get a job. That's when he made the decision to join the active Army and became a satellite communications operator/maintainer. During the six years he spent on active duty he was stationed at the Defense Communications Systems station at Landstuhl, Germany, and later transferred to Fort Huachuca Ariz.

Missing home and deciding the active duty life was not for him, Rudebusch returned to Nebraska and rejoined his maintenance company.

In 2004 Rudebusch deployed to Iraq and spent a year at Forward Operating Base Speicher. While deployed in Iraq, he helped support units which had started using commercial band radios for communication within a convoy. When the radios were turned in for maintenance, there were no technical manuals available and no repair parts in the Army inventory. What could have been a major issue was quickly solved by the members of the Nebraska Army Guard maintenance company.

"The unique thing about the Guard is that we support various equipment, not just the equipment that we have in the unit, but all types of equipment in the units that we support," said Rudebusch, now a sergeant first class assigned to the 267th Maintenance Company (Direct Support.)

Rudebusch is the maintenance chief for the 267th Maint. Co.'s Electronics Maintenance Platoon.

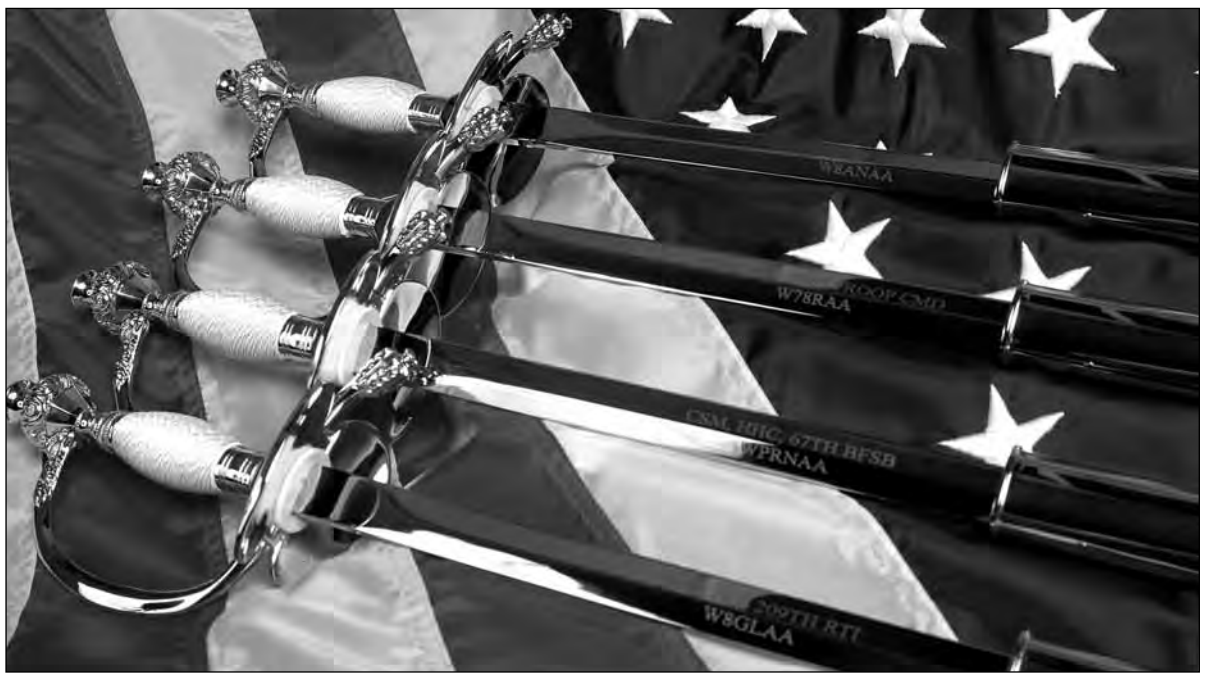
Photo by Mark Roland

Maintaining Focus: Sgt 1st Class Michael Rudebusch, maintenance chief for the 267th Maintenance Company, is also a fulltime electronic mechanic for the National Guard Bureau's Forward Repair Activity-Nebraska, supporting over 30,000 Standard Army Management Information Systems (STAMIS) and Logistic Enabler computer systems in 27 states and territories. .

"The role of the NCO in the maintenance arena is extremely important," he said. "We are the ones that make sure that all the (preventative maintenance checks and services) are done; that the Soldiers are trained, MOS qualified and that they can do their job."

"The officers in the unit have to rely on those NCOs to get the work done and to make sure the work is done to the quality that the military requires," he added, "to develop those mechanics, electronic mechanics and vehicle mechanics, to ensure they have the knowledge and abilities to test it and

See RUDEBUSCH on 16.



Photos by Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon

National Guard resurrects tradition

■Noncommissioned officer swords being presented to unit senior sergeants

By Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon
Assistant Editor

The Army National Guard resurrected a tradition that dates back more than 169 years by authorizing National Guard units to present a sword to each unit authorized a first sergeant and/or command sergeant major.

The Nebraska National Guard recently began distributing the swords to its units during "Uncasing and Assumption" ceremonies around the state.

The ceremony and passing of the sword to the unit's senior NCOs is intended to signify the senior NCO's commitment to being responsible for the Soldiers in their organization.

"The traditional role of the NCO is to ensure the accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of the Soldiers…ensuring they are trained and ready to perform all the tasks associated with the unit's mission," said Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Burch, Nebraska's state command sergeant major.

According to Burch, the history of the senior NCO sword presentation dates back to 1840 when the War Department adopted the unique NCO sword.

At that point it was a completely functional weapon intended for hard and dedicated use in war.

No longer applicable in today's warfare, the sword is now a symbol of the leadership the senior NCO provides, remaining razor sharp just like the NCO that possesses it.

NCO Swords: NCO swords will be given to each unit assigned a first sergeant and/or command sergeant major. The swords will be inscribed with the unit's designation and will be passed from outgoing senior noncommissioned officer to incoming NCOs as a symbol of the passing of responsibility for the enlisted Soldiers in their units.

"It represents a tool within the NCO Corps that was used throughout history as a fighting instrument," said Burch.

Burch said he envisions the swords will become an important symbol of the NCO Corps' commitment to ensuring that enlisted Soldiers are properly trained and cared for, and dedicated to the ultimate accomplishment of their unit's mission.

The swords will not only serve as a symbol of the NCO, they will serve as a canvas for which to display the history of each unit.

"Every sword will have an inscription of the unit that the sword belongs to and as we continue through history…and the lineage of the unit changes… that lineage will follow on the NCO sword," said Burch.

"That way 50 years from now you'll be able to see the lineage of the existence of that sword and the units that is has been passed through."

According to Burch, there are a total of 39 swords that will be given out, 13 for command sergeants major and 26 for first sergeants. The swords will be given out during uncasing ceremonies within the next few months.

1st Sgt. John Snoozy, senior sergeant for the Lincoln-based Joint Force Headquarters, was the recipient of a sword during a ceremony held at the "Spirit of '76 Armory" in Lincoln, Nov. 14.

Snoozy said he was thankful to be a part of something so rich with history.

"It's a great honor to be a part of such a military tradition," said Snoozy. "History and our foundation (are) extremely important to the military and just being a part of that little piece of history is a great honor."

Burch said he hopes the sword ceremonies will inspire the Soldiers standing in formation to better themselves and possibly become the senior NCO receiving the sword someday.

"I think there is going to be a 'wow factor' because it is a sword," said Burch.

"This is representative of every enlisted Soldier who aspires to be an NCO down the road and every NCO that aspires to be that senior noncommissioned officer in the unit."

Burch said he also sees the NCO sword as a piece of history that distinguishes the NCO Corps from those in command positions.

"There's a lot of heritage that goes back to the founding days of the NCO Corps…so that little piece of history is carried forward through the sword," said Burch.

"I hope it instills pride in our heritage and pride in the fact that the NCO Corps is, has always been and will continue to be the backbone of the Army.

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find any problems that may arise. A basic knowledge of electronics allows you to repair anything that has power applied."

Developing the Soldiers in his unit requires a lot of time to make things happen on the weekends.

"When Soldiers come in on a Saturday and Sunday, the NCOs have already (spent) at least two to three days prior to that working with our support personnel on the fulltime side on getting equipment for Soldier to work on. Making those arrangements, knowing what jobs are going to be worked, knowing what the parts status are for the equipment that is there, takes a lot of coordination prior to the actual drill, a lot of behind the scenes work."

During the weekend Rudebusch spends a lot of time supervising his maintenance personnel.

"In my position as the maintenance chief, it's (my job) to make sure that the work is done, making sure all documentation is done according to the regulations, making sure that the *right* parts are ordered, and making sure that people are actually doing the job that they are supposed to be doing."

Enforcing the standards while his Soldiers are doing maintenance is another part of the job that Rudebusch takes seriously.

"We all have the tendency to think we have the ability to fix things that may be beyond our capabilities," he said. "As an NCO it is our job to reign those in and to sometimes to motivate others who want to take short cuts."

"There are regulations for a specific reason and technical manuals for a specific reason – and that's what we work to and that's what we train to. Only then can we for sure know that we are sending out a quality product and that the customer is going to be able to use it immediately when they get it…it's an NCOs job to do that," Rudebusch said.

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Rudebusch
Hometown: Seward, Neb.
Job Title: Maintenance Chief, Electronics Maintenance Platoon, Lincoln, Neb.
Years of Service: 22
Family: Wife: Tonya; Children: Daniel, Mikayla, Victoria

Taking care of the new Soldiers in the unit is a main concern for Rudebusch and a motivator to provide a quality drill weekend, utilizing all the time available for training.

"Those Soldiers coming right back from school are highly motivated and want to get their hands on the equipment, and they don't want to come back to a unit that is doing nothing," he said.

"We get those Soldiers back and get them working on equipment."

Teaching the young Soldiers how to do their job will pay in the long run according to Rudebusch, and should be done at all levels.

"Building that ladder and that backbone that NCOs are, when my day comes to retire and somebody takes my spot, the position they vacate will be filled with somebody as qualified as themselves."

DETACHMENT SERGEANT continued from page 15.

guidance to the other detachment NCOs on training, administrative requirements and overall morale and discipline.

In essence, he serves as the unit's assistant head coach, taking the plans and overall goals of the unit commander and ensuring the missions get completed.

As a former WLC instructor, Roberts said he's constantly trying to utilize the basic leadership techniques taught at Camp Ashland. Still, like taking on any new challenge, mistakes inevitably happen, he added.

"We used to teach about the leadership side – the communication and ensuring understanding," said Roberts, adding that he knows that he sometimes fails to communicate his wishes as clearly as he'd like to. "Then what gets communicated there doesn't end up being the same."

The key to effective leadership, he added, is the ability to learn from one's mistakes while also being willing to ask questions. It's also about doing everything possible to make sure the mission gets done accurately and within the set time limits.

"The NCOs are driving the train, so to speak," said Roberts. "Definitely, the officers are making the plans and providing the guidance and so on, but somebody's got to carry it out."

"It's kind of like the middle guy in between the mission and the men," he added.

"The mission gets taken care of as well as the welfare of the Soldiers, putting out information as well as passing it up, basically ensuring that the whole picture gets taken care of."

COMMANDER continued from page 14.

As a staff sergeant assigned to a transportation company in Iraq, Jeffries serves in one of the most crucial jobs in his unit: convoy commander. As such, Jeffries exemplifies the radical changes in responsibilities that noncommissioned officers have taken on since the start of the Global War on Terrorism.

"I supervise 23 Soldiers daily and am responsible for up to 30 vehicles and 30 additional personnel while on missions," said Jeffries. "We conduct convoy security in and around Baghdad, escorting commodities of food, fuel, ammunition, etc., from the Camp Victory base to smaller contingency operating bases."

That also means that Jeffries is responsible for every aspect of the convoys he leads ranging from planning to execution.

It's a huge responsibility, but definitely one Jeffries always envisioned himself doing.

"I definitely saw myself doing this job as I have prior deployment experience in this role," said Jeffries in a recent e-mail interview. "This is the kind of duty that NCOs are meant to perform. It requires leadership, organizational ability and a high degree of technical and tactical proficiency."

To be successful in such an important and often stressful role, Jeffries said he relies upon the lessons he's learned throughout the course of his military career.

"Our NCOs are the lifeblood of this unit, carrying out the key tasks of day-to-day operations," he said. "Flexibility is the key to our success. There is no such thing as a 'typical' mission due to the ever-changing enemy (tactics, techniques and procedures) and the constant need to adjust for accommodation of Iraq's 'return to normalcy.'"

Jeffries said he's also been surprised by how little things can make a big impact.

"I have been surprised by the depth of the impact that our seemingly small piece of the pie has on the larger picture and daily 'battle rhythm,'" said Jeffries.

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That's definitely not the case today, though.

"The NCOs of today are taking on a much bigger role – a much bigger role – in that they are ultimately responsible for operations," he said.

"A prime example is your convoy commanders out on the highways and byways of Iraq. Those folks are convoy commanders," Burch added. "10 years ago they may have been a ground guide at a critical turning point. Today they are the actual convoy commanders; they're operational leaders."

This increasing level of NCO responsibility is something that will most likely continue in the months and years ahead, Burch said.

"I think first off one of the driving factors is the educational level of our NCOs. We have a lot more NCOs with college degrees," he said. "It's not required of them, but they've chosen to make their military career a life-long learning process whereby they continue to grow in their capabilities through education systems, be it military or civilian, which makes them more competent, more confident in what they do."

"That mechanic, that truck driver, that infantryman, they all have specific skill sets that they need to be good at. In days of old, the (Military Occupational Specialty) proficiency was the endgame, where now it's not just the MOS proficiency, but also the ability to step up to the challenge and take on more responsibilities," he said.

"Our Soldiers aren't afraid to take that challenge. They, in many cases, seek out the challenges and seek out the hard jobs and continue to learn and grow."

Above probably anything else, the real strength of America's military capabilities lies with its reliance and trust in the NCO Corps' ability to adapt to challenges as they occur. That's a direct result of the investment the United States made in developing a highly professional, highly competent and highly agile NCO Corps, said Burch.

"I think the NCO Corps has responded tremendously over the course of the past eight years in identifying that their role is growing," he said. "It's not really a hard line in the sand as far as how far the NCO Corps will grow and expand into, but I think the capabilities that the growth gives the Army and the Army National Guard is important."

"We still need the skills and the abilities that the Officer Corps brings to the planning process… we still need to rely on them to be that level of leadership… and we need the NCO Corps to be proficient at their level of leadership as well," he said.

"But, the more we can compliment each other, especially in this era of sustained combat operations, the more we can sustain at the high levels that we are sustaining."