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.

Electrician strives to empower Soldiers

By Maj. Kevin Hynes
Editor

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Sgt. Neal Stocking
Hometown: Omaha, Neb.
Job Title: Interior Electrician, Wahoo, Neb.
Years of Service: 12
Family: Wife: Anne; Sons: Jeff, Chris

Photo by Maj. Kevin Hynes

Job Site: Sgt. Neal Stocking, an interior electrician with Wahoo's 623rd Engineer Company (Vertical Construction,) stands near a unit construction site at the Mead Training Site this summer during his unit's annual training.

Empowering.

When it comes to describing what Sgt. Neal Stocking does in the Nebraska Army National Guard, that simple word tells volumes.

Stocking is an interior electrician with the Wahoo-based 623rd Engineer Company (Vertical Construction) and the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of Headquarters Section, 2nd Platoon. It's a job that's both challenging and rewarding at the same time.

"(It's) extremely fun. We get to do things that we normally don't get to do in the civilian world," said Stocking, a national accounts premium representative for an insurance company in Omaha. "We're doing hands-on stuff and when we're done with a project, we can actually see the results of our labors."

For Stocking, his Nebraska Army Guard assignment is actually his second go at a military career. From 1985-94 he served in the active Air Force, working first as a C-130 "Hercules" crew chief and later as a manpower specialist.

He said that about a decade after leaving the Air Force he started thinking about restarting his military career, this time in the Nebraska Army Guard.

"I'd been out of the military for about 12 years and wanted to get back in," Stocking said. "So I went to a local recruiter and he said they were getting a new company going."

That new unit was the 623rd Eng. Co., which would eventually grow to include a detachment based at the Greenlief Training Site near Hastings. Stocking said the more he learned about the fledgling construction unit, the more interested he became in learning to be an electrician.

"It was the one construction skill that I lacked the most knowledge in, so it was something that I wanted to learn," he said.

Stocking enlisted into the Nebraska Army National Guard in 2006 and soon began learning the electrician's trade. Simply put, Stocking said, Army electricians are responsible for bringing power to new structures.

"For an electrician, it's pretty much like an electrician on the outside. You're bringing power into a structure, making sure that the structure is wired according to the plan, running those wires, doing checks on the wires before applying power to the outlet and then, once power is applied, doing checks on all of the service connections – light switches and outlets – (and) making sure they're wired properly."

Stocking recently attended the two-week Warrior Leaders Course at Camp Ashland, Neb., where he received academic and leadership training in the responsibilities of a first-level NCO. Having already attended two similar NCO courses in the Air Force, Stocking said the course was an eye-opening experience.

"Personally, because I was in the Air Force before, I didn't have a whole lot of exposure to combat skills," said Stocking during a recent break during his June 6-26 annual training at the Mead Training Site in eastern Nebraska.

"I'm learning a whole lot of that real fast."

Based upon what he's learned thus far, Stocking said he definitely sees some parallels in the roles that NCOs play in the Army and Air Force.

"NCOs in the Army and NCOs in the Air Force are responsible for leading their lower enlisted (Soldiers and Airmen,)" he said.

That's particularly true in the 623rd Eng. Co., Stocking said.

"NCOs train the younger enlisted in their specialties," he said. "For me as a (sergeant) I'm mostly training electricians, but (also) on their basic Soldier tasks, weapons cleaning, weapons qualification, mounted and dismounted patrols."

That ability to develop each individual Soldier's skills and knowledge base is what makes noncommissioned officer so important, he added.

"It's very critical," he said. "The knowledge that NCOs receive through their leadership courses enables them to train the individuals to the best of their abilities."

Empowering – whether it's new buildings or enlisted Soldiers – is essentially what being a sergeant is all about.

Photo by Sgt. Michael Coleman

Giving Directions: Master Sgt. David A. Davis, personnel sergeant for the 168th Quartermaster Petroleum Supply Battalion from Scottsbluff, Neb., points out the various safety procedures that have been put into place at a Camp Guernsey, Wyo., .50 caliber machine gun range for a Aug. 10 Bosslift exercise to Brig. Gen. Roma Amundson, assistant adjutant general, Army. Co-workers say that Davis is a stickler for making sure each detail of an operation is worked out precisely, one of many lessons he learned as an infantryman serving in Vietnam after being drafted into the Army on his 21st birthday.

Guard Sergeant uses experiences from Vietnam, Afghanistan to lead Soldiers

By Sgt. Michael Coleman
Staff Writer

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Master Sgt. David A. Davis
Hometown: Scottsbluff, Neb.
Job Title: Battalion personnel sergeant, Scottsbluff, Neb.
Years of Service: 22
Family: Sons: Jacob, Nicholas, Noah

Some people see him as a strict by-the-book disciplinarian.

Some see him as a gritty battle-hardened veteran. There might even be some foul names used to describe him.

While these descriptions may appear accurate they don't begin to describe Master Sgt. David A. Davis, personnel sergeant for the 168th Quartermaster Petroleum Supply Battalion in Scottsbluff, Neb.

Davis entered military service on his 21st birthday, Jan. 14, 1969, when he was drafted for the war in Vietnam. He spent an extended tour in country as a small arms rifleman.

Until chance intervened this was the end of Davis's military career.

"I was at a VFW meeting and a buddy asked me if I ever thought about the Guard," said Davis.

After learning more about the organization, Davis enlisted into the Chadron, Neb., unit as an artilleryman under the "Try One" program.

After reenlisting for another year, a full-time position opened up. Davis has never looked back.

Davis said the discipline and order of the military appealed to him. But those weren't the only reasons he stayed in the Guard.

"When I got hired on full-time I could see the importance of what I was doing," said Davis.

Working in administration is vastly different from being an infantryman, but Davis says it is just as important. Davis discovered one of his great-grandfathers joined the Confederate army when Lt. Gen. Robert E. Lee called for volunteers. Another relative served in Ohio's Company E, 141st Regiment.

"If it wasn't for some clerk in the rear I would have never known," said Davis. "Record keeping is

See DAVIS on 17.

Sergeant leads by example

By Sgt. Michael Coleman
Staff Writer

Halfway through their annual training after having traveled over 200 miles to pick up equipment and drive it to a training site in Des Moines Iowa, Nebraska National Guardsmen of CERF (Chemical, biological, radiological/nuclear and explosive Emergency Response Force) were exhausted.

Trucks and trailers squeezed their way between emergency vehicles into an area half the size of what they were accustomed to. The vehicles were quickly unloaded and driven back through the mayhem to their staging area.

Crews scrambled about trying to move equipment out of the way of the next wave of vehicles while beginning to set up a chemical decontamination site in the cramped area.

Directing much of this apparent chaos was Sgt. 1st Class Bruce A. Nakai, the Decontamination Team noncommissioned officer-in-charge for the Nebraska CERF.

One of the traits of a good NCO is the ability to lead by example. It's something that Nakai has taken to heart.

"He always puts the mission first and strives to take care of Soldiers above all else," said Capt. Russell L. Stewart the CERF Decontamination Element commander.

"He sets the example in everything he does," said Russell. "He holds the highest standard for himself that I have ever seen."

The standard that Nakai holds is directly tied to his leadership style. Nakai said one has to be a morale builder and be able to motivate one's team to be an effective leader. To do that, a person has to lead from the front.

"Leading is more about respect... not power," said Nakai. "You have to lead from the front to get that respect."

The respect Nakai has earned from his Soldiers allows him to motivate them to perform at the best of their ability. Russell said Nakai instills a loyalty in his troops that makes them willing to go beyond what they would normally be willing to do because they don't want to disappoint him.

Photo by Sgt. Michael Coleman

Keeping the Exercise Rolling: Sgt. 1st Class Bruce Nakai works with other unit leaders to ensure that Nebraska Soldiers assigned to the state's CERF (Chemical, biological, radiological/nuclear and explosive Emergency Response Force) are ready to participate in Exercise Vigilant Guard 2009 in Des Moines, Iowa.

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Sgt. 1st Class Bruce Nakai
Hometown: LaVista, Neb.
Job Title: Decontamination Team Noncommissioned Officer-in-Charge, Omaha, Neb.
Years of Service: 11
Family: Wife: Amy, Daughter: Kailyn

Nakai has earned the respect and loyalty, say his superiors as well as his subordinates.

"He is someone that all service members, junior and senior enlisted as well as officers, can go to on advice," said Russell. "He is the single-most important element of the decon element."

Nakai couldn't have earned this respect from his Soldiers and superiors without the competence that he has gained through experience.

"He knows what it takes to be a good leader because he has had so much experience between schools and deployments," said Spc. Benjamin J. Sudtlegte, a decontamination team member.

Nakai started his career as an infantryman at Fort Benning and attended Ranger School before joining the Nebraska Army National Guard. About eight years ago he transferred from infantry to chemical reconnaissance.

Nakai said it's important to enjoy one's job because a person's attitude will reflect it. And that attitude has a great bearing on the morale of the troops.

"Taking care of troops is your sole purpose," said Nakai.

Sudtlegte said while deployed to Iraq he was able to approach Nakai with personal problems that he was having. "He is good at going from being a very good leader to a very good friend," said Sudtlegte.

Nakai isn't just a leader to his troops; he is their mentor.

"He is one of my role models," said Sudtlegte. "I strive to be like him."

Nakai said mentoring is extremely important in developing a young leader.

Nakai said Sgt. Maj. Brian Folts has been his biggest mentor. Folts was Nakai's first sergeant when he joined the Guard.

"I learned a lot by watching and talking with him," said Nakai. "Everything I have as a leader, I developed by watching him."

DAVIS continued from page 16.

important."

Spc. Damon J. Schlenker, an administration specialist with 168th QM Bn., said Davis taught him to do every job to the best of his ability.

"He taught me that even the most mundane task has a purpose and affects Soldiers' careers."

Although technologies and techniques have changed since Vietnam, Davis has kept up with the times, an important skill when he deployed to Afghanistan recently as an embedded tactical trainer. As an ETT Davis fulfilled one of an NCO's primary roles: training Soldiers, this time new members of the Afghan National Army.

"I liked the Afghan people," said Davis. "They are just like anyone else, just trying to raise a family."

"When I was in Afghanistan, that was easy compared to when I was in Vietnam," Davis added.

The way that Americans treat veterans is one of the many differences in Davis's experiences. Traveling home from Vietnam Davis said he called his dad to pick him up from the airport and asked him to bring civilian clothes because of the protesters.

"Now everyone wants to shake your hand when you come home," said Davis. "I am still bitter, but this did a lot to make up for it.

The experiences Davis has gained through two wars has shaped his approach to leadership. Staff Sgt. Jay L. Weitzel, supply sergeant for the 168th Quartermaster Battalion, said Davis uses those experiences to ensure that Soldiers are treated the right way.

"He has seen how Soldiers were treated when they came back from Vietnam, so he has a fatherly care for his Soldiers."

Master Sgt. Stephen M. Foster, operations sergeant for the168th Quartermaster Battalion, agreed, saying Davis has learned the importance of discipline while serving tours in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

"He was brought up to do things the right way," Foster said. "He lives his life and military career that way."

"He is always there to maintain the standard. He is passionate about it," added Schlenker.

Sometimes his no-nonsense, by-the-book attitude makes him seem unapproachable at first, said Weitzel.

"Some of his Soldiers are scared of him when they first meet him, but they respect him once they get to know him," said Weitzel. "He is stern, but fair. He comes off as gruff, but he always has his Soldiers' best interest at heart."

Davis said he is particularly interested in taking a strong interest in a Soldier's career progression. "I have an admiration for someone who wants to further their career. Hopefully I've helped some of them along the way."

Career lessons help Nebraska sergeant take care of 'her' Soldiers

By Mark Roland
Unit Public Affairs Representative

Growing up in Wayne Neb., Staff Sgt. Tonya Schwanke, combat medic section sergeant and full-time administrative noncommissioned officer for the Omaha-based 195th Special Operations Forward Support Company (Airborne), knew she wanted to be a member of the military.

"I had started thinking about it my junior year," Schwanke said. "A family friend was a recruiter up in Wayne and he started talking to me about it when I was younger."

"My dad was in and my grandpa was in. I don't have any brothers, so it was something that I always wanted to do... to follow in their footsteps. It was the challenge at the time; I was planning on going to college, but I wanted something else… more than just that."

Schwanke enlisted into the Nebraska Army Guard as a personnel specialist with the 105th Personnel Detachment where she said she quickly learned about the importance of taking care of Soldiers. A deployment to Jordan and Kuwait in 2003 deepened those feelings.

"In Kuwait it wasn't as much the paperwork as just keeping track of where people were," Schwanke said.

Returning from deployment Schwanke completed college and graduated in 2006 with a bachelor's degree in Business Finance and Criminal Justice.

Instead of pursuing a civilian career, Schwanke chose a military path when she became a full-time administrative sergeant for the Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP) at Camp Ashland.

"I learned a lot when I worked at the RSP. Full-time is completely different than doing it part-time," Schwanke said. "When you're (part-time) it's easy to think that this issue that I'm having isn't getting taken care of, but on full-time side, once you see how much is actually involved in taking care of the Soldiers in the unit, it opens it up to see how much work the full-time NCOs do to make sure everything is straight for (annual trainings), drills and the people that are deploying."

In January 2008 Schwanke became one of the first members of the newly organizing 195th SO FSC (Airborne.) She later became the first female member of the Nebraska Army National Guard to complete airborne. Since then her job has become even busier.

"The 195th is a little different than other units in the state because we fall under the active duty component out of Fort Bragg, (N.C.,) the 528th Sustainment Brigade. Not only do we have to answer to the battalion and the brigade here in Nebraska, we have to also handle things for (Fort Bragg,) too – what's going on, reports and different information that they ask for all the time."

Photo by Mark Roland

Keeping Paperwork Straight: Staff Sgt. Tonya Schwanke, 195th Special Operations Forward Support Company (Airborne), checks up on some paperwork at the North Omaha Readiness Center.

2009 YEAR OF THE NCO
Strength from within

Staff Sgt. Tonya Schwanke
Hometown: Lincoln, Neb.
Job Title: Administrative Sergeant, Omaha, Neb.
Years of Service: 9
Family: Single

As a unit within the United States Special Operations Command the 195th SO FSC (Airborne) handles Soldiers differently than most units of the Nebraska Army National Guard. "We have individuals that (mobilize) all the time, instead of deploying as a whole unit," Schwanke said. "We have four Soldiers that are just returning now from deployment and we have seven Soldiers that are leaving. That's another part of our (unit) that is different that regular units. We are constantly having Soldiers that are mobilizing."

"We have mechanics, a medic section, a water treatment section, fuelers, a cook section and a supply section. We have a combat engineer section which includes carpenters, masonry, electricians."

The USSOCOM pulls individual Soldiers and teams to fill slots in support of operations around the globe, with tours ranging from three weeks to seven months.

Schwanke is responsible for making sure that all administrative functions are completed so that Soldiers are paid correctly.

Schwanke balances her time on drill weekends between the administrative needs of the unit and her section sergeant responsibilities for the medics.

Schwanke credits her ability to take care of her Soldiers to the lessons she has learned throughout her career.

"All your experiences help you."