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National Guard Bureau Public Affairs

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## NATIONAL GUARD ON-THE-RECORD MEDIA ROUNDTABLE

Tuesday, January 24, 2023

TOPIC	SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS
National Guard Top Priorities	<p>National Guard Bureau:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chief of the National Guard Bureau Army General Daniel R. Hokanson</li><li>• Senior Enlisted Advisory to the Chief, National Guard Bureau Tony L. Whitehead</li></ul>

### Introduction:

STAFF: Welcome. Good morning. Thank you all for coming. Apologies for being a few minutes late.

Today, we're here with the chief of the National Guard Bureau, Gen. Dan Hokanson, and senior enlisted advisor to Gen. Hokanson, SEA Tony Whitehead, to discuss the National Guard's accomplishments in 2022 and its priorities for 2023. I'm Lt. Col. Caitlin Brown, National Guard Bureau Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating today's media roundtable. We only have until 11:15 today, so we'd ask that you please keep your questions focused on the topic of Guard priorities.

Gen. Hokanson and SEA Whitehead will have some brief opening comments, after which we'll open it up for questions. To ensure we allow time for everyone to participate, we will limit everyone to one question and one follow-up. If there's time remaining at the end, we can open it back up for additional questions.

I have a list of the media joining us remotely, and I will call on you by name. I know some of you, but not everyone, so if you're in the room with us and I call on you, please state your name and outlet before asking your question.

With that, I'll turn it over to Gen. Hokanson for his opening remarks.



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## Opening Statement:

**Gen. Hokanson:** Okay. Thank you, Cait, and good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the National Guard and lay out some of our priorities for the coming year.

Today's National Guard is ready, capable and a vital part of our National Defense Strategy. As the combat reserve of the Army and the Air Force, our soldiers and airmen are built to fight our nation's wars. It is a manning, training and equipment for combat that allows us to also serve our communities in their time of need, and if you're not already aware, the National Guard is over 430,000 strong, or 20 percent of the Joint Force, second only in size to the active-duty Army.

Right now, more than 40,000 of our men and women are engaged in missions around the world, to include over 22,000 serving outside the United States. In 2022, we provided ground and air forces to all of America's combatant commands. That included Army formations in the Middle East and Europe, global tanker, airlift and fighter aircraft support and training with our allies and partners around the globe. We supported our first responders and rescued American families when hurricanes made landfall in Florida and Puerto Rico, when tornadoes leveled a seven-mile stretch of eastern Kentucky, when wildfires scorched millions of acres out west and we rescued over 2,400 people when flash flooding hit Montana and Kentucky. We also assisted with election security during the recent midterm elections, and that doesn't begin to cover the impact we make in our local communities every day.

So what does the future look like for our National Guard? What are our priorities going forward? They're really the same enduring priorities I established when I became the chief: people, readiness, modernization and reform.

I'll start with taking care of our people because every mission is made possible by our people. That means starting with healthcare. Some 60,000 National Guard soldiers and airmen have no medical coverage. That's why the Healthcare for Our Troops Act is on my radar. If passed, it will allow every member of the Reserves and National Guard to sign up for TRICARE Reserve Select with no fees or copays. This is the right thing to do for our service members and their families, who often bear undue financial and medical hardships as a result. Yes, there is a cost to this, but I believe the lost readiness costs are more than the price of that healthcare. The Healthcare for Our Troops Act is ultimately the right thing to do both morally and for the medical readiness of our force.



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In addition to premium-free healthcare, our Guardsmen deserve the same pay and benefits when performing the same duties as their active duty and Reserve counterparts. Just like them, we spend weeks, months, even years away from our families, but to be side-by-side performing the exact same mission and the same duties and not be treated the same is something that needs to be resolved. Duty status reform goes a long way to address this in equity, which is also vital to our recruiting and retention efforts.

My second priority, readiness, primarily addresses how rapidly we respond to global Joint Force requirements and the needs of our governors. To aid in that effort, the Army National Guard will modernize its brigades and divisions to produce all-domain combat forces divisionally aligned with the Army as soon as we can. This will keep us seamlessly interoperable with the Army, make rotations more predictable and give our Guardsmen more leadership opportunities. Most of all, it will ensure we are ready whenever our nation calls. As we move to a different model of warfighting than the past two decades, we will increase our rotations at combat training centers and participation in realistic exercises because training as we fight is the best way to prepare for future conflicts.

Readiness also merges with people when it comes to fitness. Recently, my wife, Kelly, and I took part in an event where we ran a 5K, a 10K, half marathon and a marathon over four consecutive days. Now, I don't expect everyone to do that, but starting in March, we are instituting a monthly fitness challenge for our force. The challenges will emphasize not only exercise, but things like nutrition and total fitness to encourage our soldiers, airmen and their families to focus on taking care of themselves, becoming more resilient, building individual readiness and hopefully, having fun in the process.

Readiness also means continuing to build enduring trusted relationships with partners around the world through our State Partnership Program, or SPP. The National Guard is currently partnered with over 100 countries, 45 percent of the world's nations, and we expect to grow by 30 over the next 10 years. This summer, we will celebrate 30 years of the State Partnership Program, and as evidenced by the relationship between California and Ukraine, it is a program that has paid huge dividends on a small investment. Building on that relationship, Guard soldiers can continue to train our Ukrainian counterparts in Germany so they can defend their nation against Russia's illegal, unprovoked invasion.

Our next priority is modernization. We work within a system of systems, our states, our parent services and our partnerships at every level. Every one of these elements affects modernization, personnel, equipment, training, processes and more.



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We've created 25-year modernization road maps for all our major weapons systems. We're in lockstep with the Army on things like multi-domain operations, long-range precision fires, main battle tanks, air defense, future vertical lift and more. To fight side by side as the Army's combat reserve, we must be interoperable and have the same equipment whenever possible.

On the Air Force size -- side, we have 25 fighter squadrons, and we need to keep all 25 fighter squadrons because our nation needs them. These squadrons need modernized fighters to provide the combat capability and strategic depth our nation needs to deter our adversaries. Like the Air Force, we must replace legacy fighters with aircraft that meet future mission requirements. Likewise with tankers, the KC-46 will continue to replace the venerable KC-135. With tactical airlift, the C-130J will put a modern face on an old work horse. To paraphrase Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Dave Alvin, the high cost of sustaining and operating these older systems, along with their decreased relevance, makes the Air Force and the Air National Guard less effective.

But modernization is only as powerful as the organization that implements it. That's the impetus behind my fourth priority, reform. Our team exists to maximize performance and accountability, to support the 54 states, territories and D.C., to ensure our formations remain ready to fill their critical role as part of the joint force in our nation's defense. Finding ways to be more efficient and effective only makes us stronger.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm excited about the progress we've made on duty status reform. We've reduced the statuses within the Guard from over 40 to nine. That streamlines our processes, increases efficiencies and expedites our response times, which is why it is so important to get it approved.

Part of our effort to reform is through innovation, as we seek to become a more resilient part of the joint force and our communities. For example, in May of last year, the Army Corps of Engineers broke ground on a 99-acre solar energy microgrid and storage project at Joint Forces Training Base-Los Alamitos. Los Alamitos is California National Guard's primary military training facility and emergency response hub in Southern California. The microgrid would provide enough power to keep the base running for weeks after a major earthquake or other disaster, so we can continue our missions. The project is expected to both enhance energy resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We're also looking at more cost-effective solutions to military construction. Last year the Texas National Guard 3D-printed the first of its kind military barracks. At over 5,000 square feet, it houses 72 soldiers,



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was printed in 113 days, was ready for occupancy in 209 days, and at approximately 70 percent the cost of a conventional barracks.

And while COVID was difficult for many, it also forced us to rethink how we work. I established a working group to develop a policy to find the right mix of remote work and telework opportunities for National Guard Bureau positions. This initiative has a number of benefits. It improves communication between the bureau and the states. It helps retain highly skilled, talented team members and helps us better manage our talent. Most of all, it brings us closer to being the agile, adaptable, integrated force we need to be.

By prioritizing people, readiness, modernization, and reform, we'll ensure the National Guard keeps our promise to the American people, the promise to be Always Ready, Always There.

Now I would like to turn it over to my right hand, Senior Enlisted Advisor, SEA, Tony Whitehead, for his opening remarks, and after that, we look forward to your questions. Tony?

**SEA Whitehead:** Hey, thank you, General Hokanson, and good morning. I'm SEA Tony Whitehead, the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, who's sitting next to me. And as he mentioned, we have over 430,000 National Guard soldiers and airmen.

My role is to provide a voice for the enlisted force and represent their needs. In this last year, I visited over thousands and thousands of soldiers, airmen, and their families, and listened to their top issues as well as their great accomplishments.

And when we talk about accomplishments, as you heard the Chief mention, we're extremely proud of our Guardsmen for the great things they've made happen in 2022 by meeting our three core requirements—the federal mission, our state homeland mission, and of course our state partnership mission, which has been growing and impacting the world for over three years.

His priorities: our people. Through the continued improvements to enlisted professional development, career enhancement, and family programs, our Guardsmen soar to new heights of professional growth and technical competence. These programs were and are essential to our forces' health, morale, welfare, which is foundational for a ready and fighting force.



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Readiness—we're able to give valuable time back to our commanders so that our soldiers and airmen can do their training in AFSC (Air Force Specialty Codes) and MOSs (Military Occupational Specialty codes), so that they can be prepared, whether it be at home or go down range, as well as time for family programs so that we can connect back with our communities.

Regarding modernization, we saw the changes in weapons systems, equipment, and aerial platforms within our services. We continue to provide and enable advancement in tools and training for our service members needed to complete their missions and, as the Chief regularly encourages, interoperability.

Speaking of reform, NCO (non-commissioned officer) leadership and development is a force multiplier that has proven a strategic implication. As we change policies and procedures, we enabled our leaders to continue leading from the front, proving our enlisted corps will always be a force to be reckoned with.

As the Senior Enlisted Advisor, I would like to promote my three initiatives, which is educate, empower, and execute, which fall right in line with our Chief's priorities. We are continually improving professional development for our troops that they're receiving. We work on service for our members, the knowledge, the ability, and the vision to ensure our leaders know exactly what they need and that our leaders have the right people to do the right job, when the time is needed.

Nothing has been put in front of us as a National Guard that we haven't been able to accomplish, and we will continue to do so. The education and training our Guardsmen receive prepares them for whatever may come.

Looking at 2023, I can't express how excited we are about the National Guard and what's happening for our force. We're enacting a vision of the Chief's priorities, which again are people, readiness, modernization, and reform, through prioritizing funding for soldier and airmen programs, and that includes our families.

Since 1636, our Guard professionals have stood the test of time and prevailed. We proudly serve our nation, our communities, and support our partners. And with the support that we receive from our families, our employers, and the community, we will continue to do so and we'll always be Always Ready and Always There.





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So I thank you for that and I thank you for your time. We're looking forward to your questions.

## Questions & Answers:

STAFF: Okay, we'll now open it up for questions. I'd like to start with Tara from the Associated Press.

Q: Hi, thank you both for doing this. I have two questions, two different topics.

First, Ukraine—the National Guard has Abrams, you have maintainers, operators. If asked, are you able to provide training to the Ukrainians if you -- Abrams tanks are sent to Ukraine?

Gen. HOKANSON: You know, Tara, I -- I can't comment specifically on the Abrams tank, I'm not involved in those conversations, but I know that whatever the Guard has been asked to do since our initial state partnership with Ukraine, going back to 1993, that we have met every requirement, in coordination with the Ukrainian folks.

Obviously, just prior of the war, folks were there in Lviv training them. We continue to train them today on weapons systems and any other thing that they need help with in Germany. So if asked, we'll obviously do whatever we're asked to do.

Q: Has the Guard provided Abrams training before in Europe?

Gen. HOKANSON: I don't know specifically if we have or not. That's something I can definitely get back to you with though for sure.

Q: Okay. And then the second topic -- last week, Military Times and the Texas Tribune reported one of the border guards -- or one of the National Guardsmen assigned to the border had been involved in a shooting. Are you concerned that, you know, these Guard -- this duty is falling under this -- the state governor but it's still reflecting at -- upon the National Guard as a whole? Have you talked to the state governor? Do you have any concerns about this?



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Gen. HOKANSON: So Tara, obviously we're concerned with our Guardsmen, no matter what duty status that they're in. We're in close coordination and communication with the Texas National Guard leadership, and I know there's currently an ongoing investigation related to that.

But, you know, we do everything we can to help facilitate and communicate and understand exactly what they're doing, particularly when they're in a command and control of the governor, but I -- the nice thing is Tony was down there just a couple of weeks ago, and -- and Tony, I'd like to hand it over to you to -- to -- what you saw in person there.

SEA WHITEHEAD: Thanks, sir. I did have an opportunity to be there just recently, and then back in November, we -- we spent the holidays with them, which was extremely important for the soldiers that were down there.

What we found out was that their training is definitely key to -- to the work that they're doing down there. They're motivated, they are professional, they are interacting with the local officials and with our federal government as needed.

You would be really, really impressed with one, the community support, and two, the level of morale and welfare they have as -- as to the job, and they are extremely excited about doing the job.

STAFF: Okay, I'm going to go to Zoom. Haley with CNN, do you have a question?

Q: Hi, I do. Thank you so much. I was wondering if we could just kind of get more of an update -- General, you mentioned the training ongoing for Ukrainians happening now with -- with Guard soldiers out in Germany. Could you just give us an update on kind of what you're hearing and seeing as that training is ongoing?

And then I have a follow-up question.

Gen. HOKANSON: So Haley, I had the opportunity to actually visit them in 2022 in June, as we were training the Ukrainians there, and I will tell you it's -- it's a great effort. They're -- Ukrainian soldiers are





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very motivated. Obviously, their country's been invaded, an unprovoked invasion, and they're there trying to defend their -- their sovereignty.

And so we look at the training, we work with them very closely on the areas that they feel like they need help and we focus on that. And particularly any -- any newer weapons systems or training on weapons systems that they're employing, we're really focused on that.

But I would tell you it -- it's pretty motivating to see the dedication of our Guardsmen and the Ukrainian soldiers, working together to prepare them to go back into their country.

Q: Thank you. And just to follow up on the question about the situation at the border, could you just kind of clarify -- I mean, what are their left and right limits, so to speak? I mean, what -- what are they supposed to -- you know, authorized to be doing, not authorized?

I think that role has kind of evolved over time, from when they were supposed to be in this sort of operations role and not really interacting with migrants very much to now the situation where -- we just saw in the media recently. So could you just kind of go back over what those limits are for them?

Gen. HOKANSON: So Haley, I -- I mean, I can answer the question related to the Title 10 forces that we have rotationally down on the Southwest Border, and they're really in direct support of CBP (Customs and Border Protection).

With respect to Operation Lone Star and the Texas National Guard working under state active duty, we'd really have to refer you to the -- the Texas National Guard and the state of Texas to answer specific questions with -- related to what they are doing.

STAFF: Okay, do we have any other questions? Jim?

Q: Chief, just a -- if I -- if I -- if I could, you know, when Russia invaded Ukraine, everybody thought that Russia would stomp all over these folks. They had essentially the same equipment. The big difference was the training that they received, and specifically, the NCO training and the development of



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the NCO corps. Is that something that's still going on? re you still working on that, even as they're in the midst of the war? And -- and where do you see that going if, in fact, that is -- that is happening?

Gen. HOKANSON: So Jim, it -- a great point that you brought up. So if you look at the -- the invasion in 2014, after that, we worked very closely with the Ukrainians and the California National Guard to identify those areas where they felt that they could really improve to prepare themselves if anything like that occurred again, which we saw last year. And one of that, as you mentioned, was NCO development. And so as our Guard units have rotated through since 2015 with the Joint Military (sic) Training Group-Ukraine, we've really focused on developing their noncommissioned officers, as well as a couple other areas that they -- that they really wanted to work on.

And when you look at -- at the predictors when -- when the war started, there were a lot of folks that said it would be a matter of days or weeks. But from our Guardsmen that had trained the Ukrainians, they said not so fast, that they really felt that the training, that they had really taken it seriously, and we saw that -- the impact. Obviously, the greatest credit goes to the Ukrainian people and their forces for standing up for their own sovereignty and defending their homeland. But it was one of those things that we've worked on and we continue to work on with the Ukrainians right now. The key thing is areas that they ask us for support on, and training. We really need to try and focus directly on that.

Q: For the senior enlisted leader if -- are you -- are you -- are you learning lessons from the Ukrainians? I mean, obviously, this is a two-way street. Are you -- are you learning lessons from what they've gone through?

SEA WHITEHEAD: We are. I think the -- the most important things that I'd like to go back, what the chief was talking about as far as developing that enlisted corps, or that NCO development. What you find is our American forces when they went over -- and you heard me talk about educate, empower and execute. You know, the education piece was extremely important, and as the Ukrainian leaders saw the NCO corps taking the lead on the training, empowerment was extremely key to, you know, a piece -- that piece of the puzzle. They trained them. They felt empowered to actually get out and do the training themselves, and to replicate that training over and over again.

And so they found themselves on the field. Obviously, we weren't there to see it, but we saw the benefits of it. They were able to lead from the front at the lowest level of supervision. That's where our NCOs really are effective because the things that our -- our commanders empower them to do, they take hold of



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it, they educate the forces, they do the overwatch to ensure they have the training, and then execution takes place. And it was -- it's a force multiplier, and it is a morale-builder, as well.

And so for us learning, what we learned was, one, that we're doing it right, and we want to continue to prove on that because -- improve on that. I'm sorry. But what we want to find out more and more from our youngest of enlisted is, how can we better have helped them to do the job, and also get to the other side of that, which is the soldier care. Because if they have the right frame of mind and they are thinking more about the job, and they don't have to think about family, and they're thinking about morale and welfare of the soldiers that are doing the job, we see a huge benefit and them doing, you know, effectively executing the mission.

Q: Are you seeing more demand from other state partnership units to work on the NCO corps?

Gen. HOKANSON: You know, Jim, we actually have. When you look at our state partners, it really is a two-way relationship. We -- we train with them on areas that they would like to, you know, really share our expertise, and vice versa, we learn from them, as well. But after, you know, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we had a -- a few of our state partners reach out and say, okay, these are areas that we feel like we should probably develop as well, and we've really tailored our engagement since then to address those concerns that each of these separate countries have.

STAFF: Okay, we have any other questions in the room? Meghann?

Q: So a handful of these initiatives, the -- the healthcare, the duty status, the training, even the fitness challenge, seem to be kind of about getting the National Guard on par -- on par with the active duty force, and I'm wondering, because there are so many fewer overseas deployment opportunities and less, you know, sort of integration lockstep between active duty and the National Guard versus how it has been during the war on terror, is there a gap that you guys are trying to fill in terms of discipline or readiness or even fitness to keep National Guard troops just as ready to go as active duty troops are?

Gen. HOKANSON: So that's a -- a great question, Meghann, and -- and when you look at us, we have got to be ready for whatever our nation asks us to do. And what we saw during COVID is it was really no-notice mobilizations large scale of 47,000 Guardsmen across our country. And what we're really trying to focus on -- because the rotations have decreased, we still have 22,000 deployed today, but that's down



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significantly from where it was over the last 20 years. And so what we're really trying to do is encourage our Guardsmen and our trainers at every single level, our leadership, to make sure that we do focus on readiness because we don't know how much time we're going to have to prepare. So everything we can do at the individual level and the small-unit level to build that readiness so that we are ready when called, or if it's a large-scale mobilization, we've got that foundational readiness built so we'll decrease the amount of organizational readiness we need to build. So that's -- that something we're absolutely working on.

And Tony, I think you could probably touch on that, as well.

SEA WHITEHEAD: Thanks. I appreciate that, sir.

I -- I will tell you, and thank you for asking that question. We're always excited as a National Guard when we hear that, and what's so impressive about our soldiers and our airmen is when anything comes up, they're like five words you hear all the time. "Where do you need me?" And part of that means being ready at any given time.

And so what you'll find is that fitness, you know, all those things that, you know -- individual readiness, those are things that commanders, first sergeants, they're -- they're instituting throughout the formation every single time they meet with their soldiers and their airmen. And so it's not just about the training weekend where you'll see these things happen; it's a -- the communication piece that happens throughout the month. So they don't find themselves thinking, "Well, I've got to get ready to come back to drill, to get ready for fitness, to get ready to do the -- all those other things to get me ready to go downrange." These are things that are institutionalized that our soldiers and airmen are doing throughout the month.

So it's -- it's -- it's an impressive thing to watch, that citizen soldiers and airmen, they take their role extremely seriously. So it's not just about being there for the weekend; it's about throughout the month, and it's -- it's a career for them, as well.

Q: And in terms of the -- the healthcare and pay reform, is that with an eye toward retention? Is that to make sure that people who are serving in the National Guard still feel like they are getting the benefits of serving in the military even if they are not downrange as much as they used to be?



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Gen. HOKANSON: So it's really kind of twofold, obviously; that the first one is, is, you know, they make a significant investment in giving up a large part of their life to go through their training, and then give up that one weekend a month, and -- and oftentimes, it exceeds that. So we want to make sure that whenever we call them, they can step on the field and play their position. And if they've got the medical care, they can do the preventive care, or if they get injured at any time, that they're ready to go and -- and medically ready. So that's part of it.

The other thing is, is we want to make sure that we do keep an eye towards recruiting and retention, and that is a big thing. When you look at the current environment right now with a lot of companies, things that we traditionally relied on to encourage folks to join the Guard -- educational benefits, training, those type of things -- many corporations now do that as well because of how difficult the -- the environment is.

And so we need to keep in touch and in tune with that environment to provide those things that encourage people to join our organization and then stay in. One thing that is nice is, once we get folks in the organization, our retention rates are extremely high. But the key is to getting them in that front door and - and showing them what we have to offer.

STAFF: Brandy?

Q: Hi, thank you both for doing this. First, a follow-up on the 3D-printed military barracks. Are service members using those right now?

And, sort of, stepping back, big picture, what are your plans or priorities around 3D printing for innovation in the coming year?

Gen. HOKANSON: So I believe they are utilizing the barracks. I've seen pictures of it and videos. They had a news report there in Texas. But to us, when we look at the cost savings and the time at which, you know, we can't help but take a look at this as a possible solution going forward. And this was really the first test, and then we're looking for other applications where we can consider that.

And when you look at the importance of 3D printing, the ability to create just, say, parts of a piece of equipment, instead of storing it on the shelf or trying to get it one way or another, if you've got that 3D printer capable of making those parts, at the point of need, then just being able to make it when you need



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it, I think it's one of those ways that we cannot only save money but become more effective and more efficient by having that ability to produce that stuff on hand.

And Tony, you think -- anything you're seeing --

SEA WHITEHEAD: I like that, sir, I know we just had an opportunity to go to Texas to see that as well. And we look forward to seeing it, because it's amazing the -- the things that they're teaching now to some of our newest soldiers and airmen that are coming in under STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). And so 3D is probably going to be the wave of the future, not just, as we see it, as building the infrastructure, but those that are coming in that will be part of the conversation that will help it move forward.

Q: And then a follow-up, I'm interested in hearing about trends around cybersecurity assistance requests to the Guard? What did that look like in 2022? Was it on the rise? And what are you anticipating around cybersecurity assistance in 2023?

Gen. HOKANSON: So, interestingly, one of the biggest demands we get is through our state partnership programs. A lot of countries are concerned about the cyber defense of their nations and their militaries. And so -- and many times we'll leverage our -- our cyber forces to help train them and really work on the basics and sometimes advance on how they would help protect their systems.

But when you look at the -- the midterm elections, we had done this actually going back to 2016, working with the states to make sure that there was no compromise in the voting system. But within the states, the great thing is, is because our units are there under Title 32, or state active duty, they can help mitigate some of those attacks.

Examples are in Texas and Louisiana in the past couple of years, where they had malware or ransomware that attacked some of their systems. And the Guard was able to come in, on a state active-duty status, to help mitigate the impact to these public institutions. So we're there helping anywhere in any way and anywhere we can, to help mitigate that. And it also gives great experience for our Guardsmen, who are really leveraging their civilian skill set to make a difference.

STAFF: Okay, we're going to go back to Zoom. Steve with Military.com, do you have a question?





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Q: Yeah, hey, thanks, General, for -- for doing this today. Real -- real quick, what's -- what does the Guard's recruiting numbers look like so far, with the first quarter of the fiscal year?

Gen. HOKANSON: Okay, Tony, do you want to talk about recruiting?

SEA WHITEHEAD: Sure, yeah.

To get into the specifics of the numbers, that's something that we -- we're working on right now. But what I will tell you is that some of the challenges that we thought we would be facing, you know, we see them, but we are getting the right people into the National Guard, as we need them.

What I'll tell you -- and I was just in California this past weekend with the California National Guard -- what's most impressive about the new recruits that we have coming in is that when people talk about, you know, whether or not we'll meet our numbers, I -- I say it's just a matter of when, and we will do that.

But we're getting the right young Americans that are being a part of our organization because they really do want to serve. It's just a matter of connecting with them and we're finding ways to do that. We're getting -- we're getting creative, we're getting innovative, and we find that once we start doing that, they start coming to us. And some of the young faces that I saw, it just reminded me of what I talked to Gen. Hokanson about, is that we will -- we will get to those numbers that we need as a National Guard and as a DOD, it's just a matter of when.

Q: And another quick topical question of the Guard kind of coming off the -- the GWOT era -- has there been any look into expanding its special operations footprint, whether it be expanding SF (security forces) or getting a -- a Ranger element or -- or anything like that?

Gen. HOKANSON: So when we look at the Special Operations Forces -- and -- and I'll talk primarily -- respect to the Army National Guard -- the only two Special Forces groups not on active duty are -- are in the National Guard, the 19th and 20th groups.



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And right now, we don't have any plans to grow those formations but we're in close coordination with Special Operations Command and General (Bryan) Fenton to identify if there is growth opportunities, and we'll certainly be part of those conversations.

But -- but as of today, we've not established any specific growth objectives over the next year and -- and the year after.

STAFF: Okay, back -- back of the room? Sorry. Go ahead.

Q: Hi, I'm Liz Friden with Fox News. Thank you so much for doing this.

My first question is on Exercise Northern Strike. So if you could talk about the situation in the Arctic it's addressing with growing threats from China and Russia?

Gen. HOKANSON: Yeah. So I'll actually be there tomorrow. They told me to bring my cold weather gear, so I'll be ready for that. But when you look at the -- at the National Guard, obviously we have Guard units that operate in this environment, not year-round but in Alaska, Maine, Michigan, the dakotas, Minnesota. So we are used to operating in that environment.

And earlier today, I had a meeting with the defense attache from Norway and we'll be working on an exercise coming up the next couple of years to really help learn from them but also leverage what we have learned about operating in the Arctic.

What we have realized over time is just the importance of the Arctic. And many people look at it -- "well, you can survive in that." Well, we would have to do more than survive. We would need to be able to survive and operate in that environment.

And so when we look at Northern Strike, it gives us the opportunity to be in that environment and then learn how we would operate -- what type of equipment works, what type of tactic adjustments that we need to do -- because ultimately, we have to be prepared for whatever our nation asks us to do.



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And by focusing on the ability to operate in the Arctic, it will provide us just one more means to hopefully help deter aggressors from -- from testing the United States.

Q: Thank you. And my second question is on readiness. With the vaccine mandate reversed a few weeks ago, have you seen numbers change with recruitment, that sort of thing? Is it going to help, going to hurt? What -- what do you think?

Gen. HOKANSON: I think it's still a little bit too early to tell. I know when they -- the mandate was rescinded, I sent a note out as quickly as I could to all the 54 -- to send a note out to their soldiers and airmen who are not fully vaccinated to return to drill. That first drill is coming up in February. I think we'll get a much better picture there.

And then I know, within the department, they're looking at policies to address many of the numerous questions that are coming up, and we're part of that working group and we'll be involved with that to hopefully answer as many of those questions as we can.

Tony, anything?

SEA WHITEHEAD: Just briefly, sir, thank you. Our -- our senior enlisted leaders were excited about the opportunity to connect with the soldiers and airmen that they're really waiting to hear some news about. And so as the Chief said, you know, it's too soon to tell but the excitement about the opportunity to come back and to serve is high.

And so we're hoping that we see some great numbers from that but it's a matter of waiting to see. But we're -- we're -- we're impressed with what the -- what the leaders making the -- the call to say "hey, you know, how soon can we do this" -- that was one of the things they say -- "hey, how soon can we get them back into the formation?", which was exciting for us to hear, which means that they're staying connected with those soldiers and those airmen that had to make that tough decision.

Q: Just a follow-up on that -- how -- how long is that process expected to take or is it just really on an each -- person by person basis?



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Gen. HOKANSON: It -- yeah, it'll be really dependent on the -- the policy decisions that are made. And as I mentioned, we're in the working group, we're trying to get that -- the -- really, those policies established as soon as possible, but unfortunately, we just don't have a date right at this time.

STAFF: Okay, we have time for one final question. I'm going to go back to Zoom. We have Lauren with Defense One. Lauren, do you have a question?

Okay, moving on. We have Kimberly with SIGNAL Mag.

Q: Hi. Yes, thanks for your time this morning. I wanted to ask, General, what are the challenges of modernizing to have all domain combat forces to fight across all domains and, you know, in multi-domain operations?

And then for SEA Tony Whitehead, what are kind of the training -- training needs you're seeing for MDO (multi-domain operations)? Thank you.

Gen. HOKANSON: Okay. So Kimberly, when we look at multi-domain operations, obviously when we look at how our nation will fight in the future, a lot of that is based on modernization and capabilities that we're bringing to bear.

And when we look at the multi-domain, the importance for the Guard is, because we are 20 percent of the Joint Force, we are in an aspect -- or we're involved in just about everything. And so for me, there's a couple of things that I really try and focus on -- all of our equipment's got to be deployable, it's got to be sustainable, and it's got to be interoperable on the battlefield.

Now, unfortunately, we can't buy all of this equipment. At the same time, we can't produce it fast enough to field the entire military at one time. And so as we field systems, the National Guard will be part of that process, but also along the way, we need to make sure that our current systems, until they're modernized, that they're able to interact and they're interoperable with those.



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And so that's why we're very much focused on that, to make sure that whatever the National Guard get asked -- gets asked to do, that we can step on the battlefield and perform that mission and integrate with the entire Joint Force.

Yeah, Tony?

SEA WHITEHEAD: Thank you, sir. And, so to add to the question that you asked, Kim --

Gen. HOKANSON: Kimberly.

SEA WHITEHEAD: Kimberly, yeah, that's right. I made sure I wrote it down. I want to tell you, one of the -- one of the greatest things about our -- our soldiers and our airmen is that they are ready at any point in time, not just to go but to train to go.

You know, as the Chief talked about, you know, our challenge is obviously getting the resources and having the tools there to train with, and as soon as they do, they step in. So we work hand in hand with our Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, to ensure that, one, we have the -- the tools and equipment we need, and two, that we have the right enlisted leadership, our non-commissioned officers, that will go off and they will get the training that they need so they can come back and train our forces.

And so the interoperability is definitely there as soon as we go out to the -- so it -- when it goes to the multi-domain that you were talking about, again, our folks are ready to go. Interoperability is extremely important, and wherever you send us, we will do the training so that we are ready to go, not just in time but we do the training to prepare.

As a matter of fact, in a couple of weeks, I'm going to Alaska -- thanks for that, sir --

(Laughter.)

-- to do some -- to -- to see -- I was going to say "do some training" with our -- our soldiers in Alaska. And so I'm excited about seeing how they train in that environment. And the good thing is -- just like you



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were asking earlier, Meghann, the great thing is the training just doesn't happen for training week, it happens throughout the month. And sometimes, the training that takes place, it may not even take place on the field, it may take place on a computer or when they get together in small groups.

But our folks, they get the training done. As soon as there is new training, they learn it and they share that training with the masses as much as possible -- to the -- to the units that need the training. And then we're setback and we're ready to go whenever we're called.

STAFF: That's all we have time for today. Thank you for joining us. If we did not get to you or you have additional questions, please feel free to send those to the National Guard Bureau media desk, and we'll follow up those and any taken questions as soon as possible. Thank you.

Gen

. HOKANSON: Thank you, everybody. Good to see you.

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