



Employers Visit Camp Shelby

Soldiers with the 39th Brigade Troops Battalion move forward under smoke during urban operations training at Camp Shelby. The Employer Support group witnessed the training scenario first hand as the Soldiers stormed and cleared a building.

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Approximately 50 employers, civic leaders, media and military personnel visited the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team during their mobilization training here on a Feb. 20 trip sponsored by Arkansas' Employer Support for the Guard and Reserves (ESGR).

With a goal to maintain employer support for our continually mobilizing citizen Soldiers, the trip served as an opportunity to provide the employers a first-hand look at the training and conditions their employees endure while away on military service.

"Employer support is critical," said Maj. Gen. William D. Wofford, who accompanied the group on the trip. "For the last almost seven years that we've been fighting the Global War on Terror, since 9/11, we've had nothing but terrific support from our employers. The support has been truly magnificent and we need to keep it that way."

After arriving in Mississippi courtesy of an Arkansas Air National Guard C130 piloted by the 189th Airlift Wing, the group received an overview of the 39th's training from Col. Kendall Penn, the brigade commander. Penn also acknowledged that the challenges of mobilization are not limited to the military and training a Soldier for battle.

"Every Soldier and his family is making a sacrifice to be here, but we also realize they're not the only people sacrificing right now," Penn said as he addressed the employers. "Each of you has given up valuable members of your workforce, trained members, to come down and do their nation's bidding."

Following the briefing, the group headed out to the training sites to see the troops in action as well as to take an opportunity to sit down and visit over lunch with some of their employees and members of their communities. Prior to moving out, Penn added a final comment to the group on what they could expect to see.

"Very good training going on out there," he said. "Very realistic conditions."

As the group moved forward to their first site, one of those realistic conditions hit the busloads of visitors without warning. An ambush scenario played out in full complete with an improvised explosive device explosion and small arms fire by a force dressed in Middle Eastern garb and firing blank

ammunition from AK47s.

After a brief stop to discuss the scenario training and purpose, the group continued forward to see some very visual entry control point and urban operations training by the 39th Brigade Soldiers.

For many in the 39th, this training is merely a refresher. Nearly half of the 2,800 currently serving with the Brigade deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom with the unit once before, returning home just three years ago. With this latest deployment, Arkansas' total number of individuals mobilized has broken 11,000 since the Global War on Terror began. The need for strong employer support has grown in unison with these mass mobilizations.

"This is not the same Guard and Reserve it was 10 years ago," said Greg White, with Arkansas' ESGR program. "We're asking more and more and more of our service members every day."

While addressing the group at the end of the day, General Wofford echoed those thoughts and shared an additional concern that he had in reference to the nation's continual use of our citizen Soldiers through multiple mobilizations.

"My concern though is that next month or six months from now when you're interviewing a new employee - you've got a member of the Guard or the Reserve and you've got somebody that's not - who are you going to hire?"

Wofford continued by saying an employer has to focus on the bottom line of their business. That risk of losing a skilled employee to deployments might sway their decision to hire the citizen Soldier if it doesn't come with government-based compensatory benefits of some sort, an issue that is currently being addressed by both ESGR and the National Guard Association of Arkansas.

"If we don't make it profitable for businessmen and women to hire guardsmen or members of the military, we're not going to have a Guard and Reserve five or 10 years from now," said Wofford, "because it's going to be tough for them to maintain a job and deploy continuously."

"I think it's critical for the future of the reserve components that you continue to hire guardsmen," said Wofford. "The future of the Guard and Reserves lies with the employers." **R&NG**