

A Volunteer Response: The story of the Tennessee National Guard's response to September 11

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There are events throughout history that evoke powerful emotions: Pearl Harbor, President Kennedy's assassination, the loss of Space Shuttle Columbia, and September 11, 2001. On that September morning in 2001, America watched in disbelief as terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and attacked the Pentagon. The image of two passenger airliners slamming into the iconic New York City landmarks became seared into our collective memory. The deliberate brutality grounded air traffic across the country – with one exception.

Hours after the terrorist attack, the Federal Aviation Administration gave permission for a Tennessee Air National Guard C-130 to fly from Nashville to Houston, Texas. For a few hours, the 118th Air Wing's aircraft was the only plane aloft in America. The crew's mission was to transport a liver to a team of doctors waiting to perform emergency surgery on a six-month-old baby girl.

Uncertain of another terrorist attack, elevated security at airports and government buildings was implemented. Tennessee's governor, Don Sundquist, said he would "order the Tennessee National Guard to do whatever necessary to enhance airport security." The orders came quickly and on September 28, Guardsmen went on duty at Tennessee airports. Military officials expected to fill the order entirely with volunteers and did not anticipate making an official call. That is exactly what happened. Guardsmen volunteered en masse to assist with airport security. Hundreds of volunteers were turned away. The volunteer state, indeed.

The troops performed roving patrols and established check points to screen passengers arriving and departing from various terminals. Guardsmen patrolled the perimeter of the Nashville airport and checked for signs of forced entry or other indications of dangerous activity.

Guardsmen provided extra security to the Capitol building, Legislative Plaza, War Memorial Plaza, and the Tennessee Towers in Nashville. Sundquist said, "I want to ensure all Tennesseans that the most important function of state government is to protect the lives of its citizens. The events of September 11th have mandated that we shift our priorities and focus on every aspect of security in this state."

Other sensitive sites that were considered terrorist targets were evaluated for possible National

Guard support. Risk assessments were prepared for the Milan Arsenal, Holston Ammunition Plants, Watts Bar, Oak Ridge, and Sequoyah nuclear facilities. Military policemen from Ripley's 268th Military Police Company mobilized to ensure the safety and security of the Milan Arsenal and Holston Ammunition Plants.

In the months that followed, Tennessee National Guard units were mobilized to participate in Operation Noble Eagle in order to help secure critical areas within the United States under homeland defense. They helped to protect numerous military posts and other valuable sites while troops deployed to Afghanistan and later Kuwait. The 130th Rear Area Operations Center (RAOC) deployed to Kosovo around October 1st.

Many National Guard units were alerted and mobilized to participate in Operation Enduring Freedom and later, Iraqi Freedom, starting in October 2002. By February of 2006, over 100,000 National Guard Soldiers from across the country had been mobilized or deployed. 10,000 of these men and women were from Tennessee.

Almost overnight, the Army National Guard became a front line combat military component. Soldiers like those assigned to the 730th Quartermaster Company from Johnson City and Charlie Company of the 46th Engineer Battalion from Paris, Tennessee, would be busting the berms into Iraq during the first days of the invasion in 2003. In the next five years, every Tennessee Guard unit would mobilize at some point to support the Global War on Terror.

Tennessee is the fourth in the nation in deployed Soldiers since 9/11. Twenty-two members of the Tennessee National Guard have been killed in action. Most deaths occurred in Iraq and one in Afghanistan.

Currently, the Tennessee Army National Guard has nearly 700 Soldiers deployed, and the Air National Guard has 330 for a total of 1,030. More than 290 are deployed in the United States and more than 730 are deployed primarily to Kuwait and the Horn of Africa.

For the past twenty years, the Tennessee National Guard answered our nation's call with a true volunteer response living out the National Guard's motto of, "always there, always ready."