

STATEMENT OF

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Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have come here today to speak about my experiences as a Family Readiness Group Leader (FRG) of the 2nd Battalion, 224th Aviation Regiment, Virginia Army National Guard. The 2-224th AV N is an air assault battalion that was recently deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) from October 2005 to February 2007. It has approximately 400 soldiers broken into 6 companies. There are 3 Black Hawk Air Companies, one Aircraft Maintenance Company, one Ground Maintenance Company and one Headquarters Company. One of our three air companies was detached and re attached to the 159th Aviation Brigade and deployed from November 2005 to October 2006. My husband, LTC Robert McMillin took command of the Battalion in February 2003 and thus began my role as the BN FRG Leader.

In April 2003 I attended “Basic Family Readiness Group Leadership Training”, offered by the State Family Programs office. My FRG responsibilities at that time centered on planning a summer and holiday event and fundraising for the unit FRG. Meetings were every other month as needed. At that time, I had only two volunteers that consistently showed and helped. Appreciating that this current structure was similar to what had always been in place, it certainly would not support a deployment and would not meet the future needs of our unit. It was at this time the realization that in our current military world, it was not a matter of “if” we would deploy, but “when” and in that light, we as the FRG needed to have our own deployment plan in order for us to be successful during a deployment.

My proposed plan was very well received and after one meeting discussing what families need during deployment, I had a core group of about ten family members that created our current FRG structure. Most of our research centered simply on our own experiences with good and bad deployments no matter when, where or how long they were. We followed that up with information from our Family Programs Office and Family Assistance Centers in our area. We surveyed our unit and asked what they all wanted/needed and by early summer of 2005 we had narrowed down our areas of need and planned on how to address them.

1. The need for an information/communication structure that was similar the military side.

Plan- Organize the same as the BN with each company having a FRG Coordinator and the battalion with an overall FRG Leader, We called it chain of concern verses chain of command

2. We need to decide on consistent way to communicate in our chain of concern

Plan- Primary mode for everyday info= e-mail. Crisis-phone (or if the information is not appropriate for e-mail, Secondary – Monthly newsletters- to supplement e-mail and reach all family members, especially parents

3. We have a large single soldier population and a population of actively involved parents; we need to address their needs

Plan- Have a parent coordinator that was solely responsible for supporting the parents and insuring they were getting info specific to their needs (they were still receiving all the battalion/company specific information if they wanted. This was an additional support network)

4. Our soldiers and their families live all over Virginia and Maryland, we need to insure that as many of our families that want/need to attend are able

Plan- Schedule our BN FRG Meetings on a consistent date and time so family members can plan ahead. Have child care services provided so those families with children do not have to find child care.

5. With all our families spread all over the state we need to insure there is a local social/support network if needed

Plan- Have regional volunteers that would coordinate area social/support events based on locations of family members

Once our plan was agreed upon, we began filling roles with volunteers. I attended the National Volunteer Workshop sponsored by National Guard Bureau Family Programs in July 2005. This training combined with our new structure laid the frame work for our upcoming deployment scheduled for October, 2005. We scheduled a Family Day with the Battalion Commander that included briefings from Tricare, Red Cross, Finance, Legal, Family Readiness and Unit Mission. This event formally rolled out our new FRG structure as all Company Coordinators were established and introduced.

Our next hurdle was building the relationships between Company Commander and Company Coordinator. That proved to be a constant work in progress, but one worth investing the effort. I established formal communication lines with the rear detachment and my assigned Family Assistant Center. We decided on how we would communicate and updated rosters as much as we could.

The unit mobilized to Ft. Dixx without any problems. We had few calls as the unit remained stateside for training and most of our work was spent on updating and organizing soldier and family rosters. The 2-224thAVN deployed to Iraq in January of 2006 and the FRG was up and running. Our only areas not filled were our regional representatives.

Once the unit left country our calls and e-mails began to pick up. All family concerns were to go through the company coordinators (or me if the situation warranted it) and then would be routed to the appropriate person or office. If it was military it went to the rear detachment or the Company/ Battalion Commander. If the need was about Tricare, Deers, financial or legal the family member is referred to a FAC in their area. Most calls were handled at the company level as we had planned and I was consulted as needed. At first I would get anywhere from two to three calls a day. Most were quick fixes getting

people on e-mail, updating personal info and directing family members to local Family Assistance Centers. As the unit arrived at their duty station in Iraq, most of the calls/emails we received centered on their well being. This is where having good and timely communication with the unit command made all the difference in a deployment. I was able to assist families with concerns related to their soldiers and likewise my husband could assist the soldiers with concerns related to their families. This allowed the soldier to concentrate on his/her job and know the FRG was supporting his family member. This occurred at the company level much of the time; however some requests would always come through me as warranted by the BN Commander. By the end of the deployment, there was very little that could not get accomplished on either the unit or FRG side.

The most prevalent issues throughout the deployment were (in no particular order):

1. Initial pay problems/inaccurate information in DEERs
2. Red Cross Messages (both ways)
3. Personal relationship problems i.e. Child support, related benefits, custody, separation
4. lack of knowledge of benefits available and where to get help
5. family morale support of current situation/increase in daily stress/healthy coping/ needing to “talk”

Top Challenges we felt during deployment:

1. Inconsistent communication methods between families and soldiers
Resolution- nothing, this one you have to let alone unless there is a safety concern
2. The Media (watching news all the time)
Resolution-recommend families to limit news if results are affecting daily life and increasing stress. This improved as trust in FRG communication grew. NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS!!!!
3. Having new soldiers added to unit after mobilized throughout much of deployment
Resolution- Another reason to have good communication and respect for and from your unit commanders. Most company commanders or a designee would send updated information about the soldier to include a family contact. This was not as good as it could have been.
4. It was hard to follow up on longer term issues when you are trying to take care of the kids, yard, bills etc.
Resolution- really wasn't one, though having another FRG coordinator step in and help made it better.

As a leadership group our biggest concern/stresses were over the safety of the soldiers and making sure that we had good communication with our commanders as needed. We worried that we would be able to handle a crisis should one occur. It was an unwritten rule that I would always keep up with the news. One of my leaders worked in a place

that had the news on all time, so she would call me immediately if a Blackhawk went down. We got really good at knowing who was flying and if a helicopter went down we could quickly tell by the number of crew members if we needed to worry. I had wonderful support from the Virginia Army National Guard Chief of Staff's Office and was very well supported when there were concerns of that magnitude so I could plan accordingly. This still never can take away the horrible pit in your stomach when you are out being a mom at the baseball field, shopping in a store, or just driving in the car and you hear something has happened and a helicopter goes down. It is one of the worst feelings you can have and you know the next thing you must do is quickly try to get clarification and possibly enact the plan you always have in place for the care of your children and pets in case of an emergency/crisis. Thank goodness we had only a handful of these scares and were not paralyzed by fear.

One specific event that occurred during our deployment that warrants special attention is that of the events of January 20, 2007. This testimony in itself proves the importance of a well organized and supported family readiness group. I was driving home from Williamsburg, Virginia. My children were with a friend and I was on my way to pick them up. My cell phone rang; it was one of my Company FRG Coordinators. She had received a call from a wife of a pilot who had been watching the news, and had seen at the bottom that Blackhawk went down in the same area that our unit was stationed. Not having my FRG book with me, the only number I had was the State Chaplain's cell phone number. I dialed it and he answered. I asked him to please have someone call me that could help and within a twenty minute time frame I was assured it was not our unit. I promptly called back the leader who had called me and let her know and then called another FRG Coordinator that I knew was close to a computer to send out the info to the rest of the leaders. I still had an unsettling feeling and later that evening and early the next day I was notified that two of the soldiers on that aircraft were part of our aviation community. They were with another group; however the impact on my families would be great. I knew we needed to come together to mourn the loss of our friends so within thirty six hours our FRG arranged a prayer service in honor of these two soldiers. Through our communication network we were able to inform our whole unit as well as many retired and current military personnel. We had over one hundred and twenty persons show. Our FRG was also instrumental in initial and long term support of both families. We had unit representation at all memorial services and continue to care for both families.

Throughout the whole deployment we had many ups and downs that are consistent with all deployed families. We created an awesome FRG Program that should be able to carry on long after I am not in charge. I truly believe our deployment was made better because of the Family Readiness Group and the wonderful volunteers that stepped up to help. So far we have replacements for all our key positions and have already begun post deployment evaluation of the program. Thank-you for taking the time to hear my testimony, I wish you well in your endeavor.

