

My 2-Day Military Training Experience

By Pat Ripley, Human Resources Manager, Hydro-Klean

It was truly an exhilarating, memorable experience but I never want to do it again. Firsthand, I learned what it's like to be a civilian soldier of the Iowa National Guard. Aboard two Chinook helicopters on July 12, approximately 30 Iowa employer representatives and I flew to Camp Ripley (impressive name, I must say), Minnesota. Sponsored by the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), the intent of the "Boss Lift" was to educate employers on the vital role their employees play, what the annual two-week training consists of, and how employers can support Guard/Reserve employees.

Flying at a speed of 200 mph, the relatively smooth flight from Marshalltown to Camp Ripley only took two hours. However, when you're overcome by motion sickness, two hours seems like forever. From our vantage point of 3,500 feet above ground, the rural scenery was breathtaking from the open back door, but unfortunately, I quickly learned it was better to keep my eyes closed and chew gum.

Upon our arrival at the 53,000-acre camp, we civilians were debriefed before starting our military "training". Heavily armed with bug spray, earplugs and helmets, we rode in the back of large trucks over miles of rugged terrain, observing the Transportation Unit's convoy training. Soldiers practiced their target shooting skills at "enemies" from a moving vehicle. Although their large guns contained blanks, the noise was extremely loud and lifelike, and the bugs and deer ticks were abundant in the wooded wilderness. Next on the schedule was an overview of the assortment of artillery, followed by an ambush combat exercise in an open field where soldiers and volunteer civilians crawled through tall grass. Those exercises included real-life mock scenarios of tending to the "injured".



The next day, after a high carbohydrate breakfast in the mess hall at 7:00 a.m., a parade of Humvees, all complete with gun turrets, transported Military Police and civilian visitors to another desolate, scenic area of the camp for a close quarters combat exercise on urban terrain. This simulation involved walking through a mock war-ridden town, always prepared for hostile fire, safely entering buildings to check for enemies, while constantly looking out for their buddies and themselves. We had the opportunity to fire an assortment of weapons including very heavy, intimidating machine guns and fake (but noisy) hand grenades (which require significant strength just to activate.)



Prior to departing on the Chinook, and returning to our civilian lives, we taste-tested the bland meals, ready to eat (MRE) and most of us probably left half hungry, wondering how military personnel survive on those surprise food packages.

Thankfully, as visitors, we were exempt from many military requirements such as the rigorous exercise, night-time training, sleeping in barracks, and the everyday attire of boots, helmets, uniforms, guns, ammunition, and protective vests (which can weigh as much as 35 pounds with the ceramic plates). Fortunately, the weather was cool during our stay, and the trip only lasted two days versus two weeks. Unfortunately, even with Dramamine tablets, the return trip on the Chinook wasn't much better for me. Again, the weather was perfect for flying and the helicopter flight was smooth, but I had to refrain from looking at the scenery and chew my gum.

This was truly an educational, once-in-a-lifetime experience that I'd recommend to any organization, especially one with employees in the National Guard or Reserve. Not only did it give me a new perspective of military life and annual training, this exercise allowed me to interact with Iowa soldiers and witness their positive attitudes, professionalism, leadership, and most importantly, their commitment to serve our country.

Even if I met the military's requirements for enlistees, I'll be the first to admit I don't have what it takes to be a civilian soldier in non-active duty, much less active duty. I wouldn't want to be subjected to enemy fire, roadside bombs, 110+ degree desert heat, sleeping in tents, etc., not to mention balancing military and civilian responsibilities, the rigorous, physical activity, the two-week annual training, or giving up one weekend a month to be combat ready in the event of active duty deployment.

Hydro-Klean is very proud to employ two Citizen Soldiers. Our Health & Safety Manager, 1st Lieutenant Nic Jones, is Commander of A Company 2/34 BSTB of the National Guard. A member of the Guard for 7 years, Nic spent a year activated in Iraq in 2005. Another employee, Drew Sobek, Service Laborer, has been a Marine reservist for 2.5 years. A member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 24th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division, of Fort Des Moines, Infantryman Sobek was recently ordered to active duty in Iraq for approximately one year.