

Weekday warriors: A group of local business leaders got a hands-on lesson in life in the military during an overnight stay at a military training camp.

By Melissa Regennitter Of the Muscatine Journal (July 16, 2007)

CAMP RIPLEY, Minn. — As they hid in the trees and tall grass, M16 machine guns propped and ready to fire, Eric Smith and Mike Allbee got the order to charge the incoming insurgents who were throwing hand grenades and shooting in their direction.

“Attack, attack, attack!” the platoon leader yelled. The men crept forward, ducking in the grass and then popping up to fire at the enemy.

The mock drill, with mock ammunition, was one of the many hands-on events that Muscatine business leaders participated in on July 12 and 13 as part of the Bosslift event held by the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). The ESGR is a U.S. Department of Defense organization aimed at building relationships between employers and members of the Army National Guard and Reserves.

Five Muscatine business professionals took part in the event:

- Eric Smith, 35, manager at Allsteel's tile factory
- Mike Allbee, 46, member and community relations manager for Allsteel
- David Morrison, 60, GPC-KFI-VII Credit Union President and founder
- Jeff Bohling, 52, President's aide at Muscatine Foods Corp.
- Heather Cross, 25, water resources engineer for Stanley Consultants Inc.

Along with them were ESGR volunteers Greg Monroe, an employee of Grain Processing Corp., and an Iowa National Guard aviation unit veteran who served from 1986-96, and Roger Roskens, retired Louisa-Muscatine School principal, who assisted in recruiting employers to join the program.

In addition, Muscatine Journal reporter Melissa Regennitter and photographer Beth Van Zandt accompanied the group on the trip.

“They are learning and getting involved, and they're enjoying it. That's what it's all about,” Monroe said of the employers.

According to the ESGR, only one percent of the United States population is enlisted in the military, and the National Guard/Reserves make up one half of that number.

The group left Davenport early in the morning on July 12 aboard a CH-47 Chinook helicopter and stopped off in Marshalltown to pick up more Bosslift participants.

They were all smiles as they put in their earplugs and prepared for takeoff. For many of them, it was the first time to fly in a helicopter and definitely the first time flying with the back ramp open and a panoramic view of the world from 3,500-feet in the air.

They landed at Camp Ripley about noon. At least 45 participants from across the state joined them for debriefing.



Spc. Josh Perkins of the Iowa National Guard 2133rd Transportation Company of Muscatine and Centerville watches the tree line during an exercise at Camp Ripley Thursday afternoon in Little Falls, Minn. Participants in Bosslift rode along with members of the transportation company, observing their training procedures. Photo: Beth Van Zandt/Muscatine Journal

Learning experience

Smith and Allbee knew that there were enlistees who were Allsteel employees at Camp Ripley for their yearly two-week training, but weren't sure who or how many were there — an oversight they said they'd make sure to rectify in the future.

Their first encounter upon arrival was with Sgt. Shuron Evans, 32, Muscatine, a two-year Allsteel employee.

Evans said she was excited to see her co-workers. Though she knew a Bosslift would take place and the soldiers had been preparing for it, she wasn't sure anyone from Allsteel would be involved.

"I am happy they're here and taking the time to learn about what I do," Evans said. "They've always been supportive but this shows that they are interested."

Evans, a 13-year member of the Iowa National Guard 2133rd Transportation Company of Muscatine and Centerville, Detachment 1, said she has had issues in the past with a different employer who tried to deny her right to go to training. But thanks to the Uniform Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, the issue was quickly resolved.

The law, enacted in 1994, is in place to ensure reemployment rights to persons who have been absent from a position of employment because of service in the military or for training. The law also ensures employer rights by requiring the employee to give notice prior to their leave.

The ESGR works to educate employers on the rights of both parties and to build relationships as well as give employers the opportunity to see their employees in training.

In training

On day one, the Bosslift tour took the employers on a truck convoy with the 2133rd Transportation Company on a combat trail through a mock town that resembles a Baghdad street.

The military has changed training dramatically since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, said 1st Sgt. Les Dennis, 43, a Muscatine native and part of the 2133rd Transportation Company. Today, soldiers face road-side bombs like never before and are forced to enter hostile areas that, in the past, they might have just bombed and demolished. Now they must take more consideration for the property and cause minimal damage. He added that anything soldiers are experiencing in theater operations is reflected in training.

Though they were loaded down with at least 40 pounds of equipment — including boots, a helmet, armored vests, long-sleeved pants and shirts and their weapon — the soldiers didn't complain, thanks in part to the mild temperatures.

The Kevlar military helmet, just over three pounds according to one manufacturer's Web site, began to weigh on the civilians who were wearing one for the convoy.

"I am not sure I'd be able to take this on a daily basis," Cross said, after rubbing her neck and mentioning that her chiropractor won't be too happy with her decision to inflict injury upon herself by lugging the helmet atop her small frame. Cross made it a point to participate in all activities to gain the most from her Bosslift experience.

She was unaware of any Stanley Consultants employees training at Camp Ripley but said she knows there are National Guard members employed by Stanley and that the company supports their choice to serve their country.

The sound of mock ammunition bursting about kept the soldiers who rode with the civilians on constant guard.

Spc. Josh Perkins, 24, Grandview, said he was happy to see employers from Muscatine at the camp. Though his employer, the CAM II Warehouse in Muscatine, was not on board, he said they have been supportive and he wouldn't really want them there watching him because it might make him uneasy.

Perkins' high school principal, Roskens, was there, though the two may not have run into one another.

Chow time

Back at the mess hall, the employers mingled with soldiers and ate pork chops. The military offered a variety of fruits, vegetables and breads with the meals the civilians were served. According to the soldiers at the table, these sorts of meals were typical.

By 7 a.m., the group was up again and back to the mess hall, which resembled a high school cafeteria, for breakfast.

As Cross questioned her hamburger gravy that covered a biscuit on her plate, she asked “Has anyone every actually had hamburger gravy before?”

Unimpressed with the grey sludge, she and the rest of the civilians around her continued to eat it, happy to have gotten the experience.

Allsteel employee Shane Mathias, 31, an E3 with the 2133rd Transportation Company, passed through the mess hall and surprised the Allsteel employees. Mathias was off to work at a Humvee training class and didn’t get to join Smith and Allbee, but wore a smile as the shook hands.

“I didn’t know they were here. It makes you think these guys really do care about you,” Mathias said.

Back to training

The employees loaded up in a Humvee convoy with the 186 U.S. Army Military Police who were also in training at Camp Ripley.

They took a close-quarters combat course with the soldiers, which was aimed at training in military operations on urban terrain. The employers had a great time shooting machine guns and throwing hand grenades in the mock city.

Bohling said seeing the training first-hand was an awesome experience. He added that he views the ESGR as a liaison between businesses and employees. The experience has inclined him to consider more in depth what Muscatine Foods Corp.’s commitment to its soldiers will be in the future, as well as putting things in perspective.

“These are ordinary people out here doing extraordinary things. I’ve always respected the service duty, but now I have a new perspective after interacting with the soldiers and hearing their experiences and reasons for joining.”

He added that he didn’t believe any of his employees were at the camp during this training course but he took the time to talk to as many soldiers as possible.

Sgt. Jennifer Peters, 20, of the 186 MP, said she expects to be deployed at some point and is proud that her employer, Allsteel, was represented at the Bosslift.

“I am not worried about being deployed at all,” she said fearlessly. “We are prepared, we know we’ll be going; that’s what we’ve been training for.”

1st Sgt. Dennis said that Bosslift gives employers the “wow-factor” when it comes to knowing what their soldiers are accomplishing while away for training.

“It opens up communications and builds relationships,” he said. He added that he’s rarely had to deal with serious issues where employers mistreat soldiers due to their training requirements, but that it’s still ideal to build on the support between employer and employee.

“Allbee agreed. He said he plans to get more involved with formal recognition of soldiers company-wide and hold send-off parties for soldiers from Allsteel who will be deployed in the future.

“They are learning from the military what our company is all about — continuous improvement, leadership, teamwork, discipline and following standard procedure,” Allbee said. “I’ll take one of these guys on my team any day.”

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