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Troops could face shorter deployments this time

By Andy Graham | agraham@heraldt.com
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Perhaps they will be home for Christmas this year.

The Indiana National Guard personnel who gathered with their families Wednesday at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis are headed for deployment in Iraq but are scheduled to be back home by Dec. 10, 2008.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the former Indiana University graduate student who took over from Donald Rumsfeld on Dec. 18, 2006, has established guidelines that should shorten deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The secretary of defense has changed policy, moving toward a 12-month total commitment, rather than 12 months 'boots on the ground,'" National Guard spokesman Rick Breitenfeldt, on the phone from the Guard's national bureau offices in Arlington, Va., explained Monday. "The new policy will count the time from when troops report through the time they're demobilized, which would translate to perhaps eight or nine months on the ground in Iraq rather than 12.

"There is also a policy now being pursued with the intent that each governor in all 50 states will have at least 50 percent of their state's National Guard resources available at any given moment."

Currently, counting the 3,400-strong contingent from the 76th Infantry Brigade Combat



Members of the 76th Brigade Combat team bow their heads in prayer Wednesday at the RCA Dome during a ceremony before they leave for Georgia, then Iraq. Photo by A.J. Nelson.

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Team and other units who departed Wednesday after initially reporting to their home depots Dec. 10, about 30 percent of Indiana's National Guard strength is mobilized.

Capt. John Stamm of Indiana's Army National Guard said his organization has a current "assigned personnel strength" of 12,439, and adding the Indiana Air National Guard's 1,857 makes a combined total of 14,296. Stamm said that just over 4,000 of those troops are now on active duty.

Stamm noted that in addition to deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Indiana National Guard troops had been involved in a variety of other duties in recent years, such as supplying troops for "Operation Jump Start" to patrol and build fencing along the border between the United States and Mexico or engineers to build courts for detainee judicial proceedings at Guantanamo Bay. But he noted Gov. Mitch Daniels had plenty of troops at his disposal should local needs arise.

"With some personnel and resources deployed overseas, we obviously have less from which to draw, but we are ready to meet issues and situations which crop up in Indiana," Stamm said. "We are not undermanned. The National Guard still meets all the requests for support from the (Indiana) Department of Homeland Security."

Stamm said Guard recruiting levels are holding up well. "Actually, from what I gather, we're getting more recruits than we had expected," he said. "We had the surge of recruits after 9-11, obviously, but we're not hurting for recruitment at all now, either. There is no lack for volunteers. We're retaining people and getting new recruits."

"Not everybody 're-ups' (re-enlists), of course. Some people retire, have already done a couple of tours, have certainly already done their bit."

There are more "bits" to do these days. Only two Indiana Guard units were deployed for the 1991 Gulf War, a postal unit that no longer exists and the 1438th transport company. But the number of Indiana Guard troops sent to Afghanistan and Iraq since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, is now nearing 10,000. The state had supplied 4,995 Army troops and 1,329 Air troops before this week's deployment of 3,400 more.

Stamm said the Indiana Guard has sustained 13 fatalities in action to date for Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. He had no immediate figures for deaths due to other causes or for the number of Indiana Guard wounded, but the percentages of wounded compared to deaths is much higher in Iraq than for previous conflicts, due to advances in medicine and the relatively quick availability of treatment in the operational theaters.

Guard members receive extra compensation for overseas deployment that acknowledges separation from family, including tax-free pay for hazardous duty.

"Everybody in a combat theater gets extra pay, with the people actually getting shot at getting a bit more than the people who aren't," Stamm said. "I don't know that the extra amount really makes it seem worth getting shot at, but at least it's something."

Some Guard members still end up bringing home less per month than they did from civilian jobs left behind, which can pinch families in terms of their financial commitments. Families in those circumstances can contact the National Guard Relief Fund.

Stamm said donating to the relief fund was "probably the best way local people can help" support those who are serving and their families. "People can also go to sites such as anysoldier.com and americasupportsyou.org and find ways to help," Stamm said, "or donate to the USO or similar organizations benefiting service men and women."

Donations to the relief fund should be addressed to Indiana National Guard Relief Fund Inc., Hoosier Trust Company, Attn.: Connie Allman, 9339 Priority Way, West Drive, Suite 130, Indianapolis, IN 46240. 100 percent of all donations go directly to Guard members and their families.

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