

# South Dakota National Guard

## Public Affairs Office

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## **SD Guard members reflect on service, impacts of 9/11 on 20th anniversary**

By Lt. Col. Anthony Deiss – SDNG Public Affairs Office

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Capt. John Weber was serving on a temporary duty assignment for training in the Boston area. Like many South Dakota National Guard members, Weber started his day like most others with nothing out of the ordinary.

While picking up breakfast at a drive-thru restaurant, he first learned of some disturbing news. “The server mentioned that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. Since I didn’t have the radio on at that point, I turned it on and it was being reported,” Weber said.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jerry Duba, a C-12 pilot, was preparing his aircraft to transport Air National Guard leaders from South Dakota to Washington D.C. “We saw the first plane hit the tower and thought it was a terrible accident,” he said. “We proceeded to load the passengers, and I was just pulling the door shut when the engines shut down and (the co-pilot) informed us of an air traffic shutdown.”

Shortly after arriving to his training location, Weber and his fellow classmates learned a second plane hit the other tower of the World Trade Center. “Nobody at class really knew what was going on after the first plane hit the tower. It seemed at that point that it could have been an accident,” Weber said. “When the second plane hit the tower, it was clear at that time it was a terrorist attack.”

Staff Sgt. Richard Bauman was working and living in Chicago, Illinois, at the time. “It was the largest traffic rush I have ever been involved in, as downtown Chicago evacuated in the belief that tall buildings in large U.S. cities were being targeted,” he said.

Fiona Berndt was a 1st grader at New Hampton Elementary School in Iowa when she first heard of the events unfolding. “They released everyone from school,” said Berndt. “When I got home, my mom had brought the TV into the kitchen and it was all over the news. At the time, my brother was in boot camp for the Navy, and my mom was worried with what was going to happen with him.”

“Good Morning America was playing on our bedroom TV as I was getting ready for work,” said Beth Walker, wife of a SDNG soldier. “Our three-month-old daughter was lying in her crib. Charles Gibson and Diane Sawyer were on TV reporting the first tower had just been struck! I picked up my daughter, held her close and as the second plane took out the second tower, I started to cry and said this is going to change everything for your daddy Sydney!”

Staff Sgt. Grant Serna was supervising one of his cable technicians install an outlet in a home overlooking the Missouri River west of Yankton when he first heard the news. “(We) got the TV working just after the first tower was crashed into,” Serna said. “The homeowner, my tech and I watched coverage for an hour or so. I called my unit repeatedly, with only a busy signal, as most in the unit were doing the same.”

Confusion, worry, sadness, anger, and what will come next were just a few of the thoughts and emotions racing through the hearts and minds of everyday Americans and those serving in military uniform. In the wake of the attacks, SDNG units would be put on high alert, with soldiers and airmen activating for statewide missions providing security on military installations, airports and other potential targets.

“That started a spiral of events leading to armed soldiers and airmen assisting at airports with security all over the nation, including South Dakota,” said retired Maj. Gen. Robert Bray. “Our nation would soon be at war.”

Bray, a colonel and commander of the 147th Field Artillery Brigade in Sioux Falls at the time, says orders came quickly from the governor to provide security at the Sioux Falls Airport. “Before the day was out, we had established and trained on the Rules of Force, conducted elementary building security, conducted weapons qualification, and deployed soldiers to the airport,” he said.

Additional SDNG units would alert their soldiers and airmen to help secure airports in Rapid City and five other S.D. cities. Crews from the 114th Tactical Fighter Wing in Sioux Falls were also put on alert for possible immediate missions. The Air National Guard was primarily responsible for the country’s air defense. The 114th’s F-16 aircraft were loaded with munitions and ready to fly, if the call came.

The nation and the world would soon come to learn 19 al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial aircraft; crashing two of them into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and Flight 93 into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attack took the lives of nearly 3,000 people, making it the worst attack on American soil since the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941.

On the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, the SDNG reflects on how the events that day impacted the lives of its members and the organization they serve. The 9/11 terrorist attacks triggered major U.S. initiatives to combat terrorism across the globe. For the next two decades, more than 9,300 SDNG soldiers and airmen from dozens of units would be called up time and time again for federal service in support of various stateside missions and overseas deployments.

The U.S. officially began military operations in Afghanistan in October 2001 to remove the Taliban regime and destroy Osama bin Laden’s and the al Qaeda terrorist network based there. Over a year later, the U.S. would also turn its attention to Iraq’s dictator Saddam Hussein as another main threat to national security.

By early 2003, SDNG units would be federally mobilized to support homeland security missions and overseas contingency operations in support of the Global War on Terrorism. These deployments began with hundreds of soldiers and airmen from several units mobilizing in support of Operation Noble Eagle, providing security operations at Ellsworth Air Force Base and Joe Foss Field in South Dakota, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and Fort Carson, Colorado.

At the same time, more than a dozen SDNG units would also deploy for operations throughout Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East, with dozens more deploying in the following years. During this period, the SDNG had not seen such deployments on a large and continuous scale since the organization experienced a full mobilization of its forces during World Wars I and II and the Korean War.

“I’ve always been proud to be part of the one percent of this country’s population that steps up to protect our country,” said Duba, who retired after 32 years as a chief warrant officer 5 and a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. “Most of the adult males in my life, including my father, were on active duty during World War II, so it just seemed natural that I would go into the military.”

“When I joined the military, I never thought I would be called to serve in combat,” said Weber, who also served in Afghanistan and retired as a colonel after 34 years of service. “The National Guard was very different back then, prior to 9/11. We trained and prepared for combat...but the possibility seemed very remote. The attacks on 9/11 changed everything.”

The operational tempo of the SDNG to recruit, train, equip, and deploy units and service members for various operations affected the SDNG in a number of ways.

“Soldiers who joined or stayed as part of the organization to continue to serve knew that they would deploy,” Weber added. “They wanted to deploy and joined for that specific reason.”

“I think 9/11 impacted my decision to serve because I witnessed so many people (friends and family) sign up for the military shortly after the attacks,” said Berndt, who later joined the SDNG and serves as a staff sergeant. “I saw people step up and serve their country, and I felt like it was my duty to do the same thing.”

“Just prior (to 9/11), I had nearly decided to get out of the Guard and pursue my civilian job aspirations,” said Serna, who currently serves as a sergeant first class and readiness NCO. “After that, there was no chance that was happening. The burst of patriotism was incredible and stands in stark contrast to today.”

One of biggest impacts to the National Guard stemming from 9/11 was a greater shift from a domestic emergency and homeland security force to an operational force fully integrated into active-duty deployments and missions.

The SDNG was largely known for their role to support the state and assist civil authorities when responding to wildland fires, floods, tornadoes and winter storms. The South Dakota blizzard of 1965, Rapid City Flood of 1972, 1998 Spencer Tornado, and Jasper Fire of 2000 are just a few of the state’s major natural disasters the SDNG was called on to support. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began, and continued, the SDNG experienced a steady state of mobilizations for federal deployments.

“That moment the first plane crashed into that building, you just felt in your gut that the whole world was changing,” Serna said. “The Guard morphed into a force that keeps the peace; takes the fight to the enemy; supports national and state missions directly and more often federal missions.”

“After 9/11, the National Guard shifted to an operational force,” Weber said. “Units were placed on a rotational deployment schedule.” National Guard forces were needed to meet the demands of the Department of Defense to support a war on multiple fronts and engage in warfighting functions, conduct security and stability missions, and support multi-national partnerships.

“The American citizen realized how important our military is,” said Bauman, now a captain in the SDNG who served three tours in Iraq. “Traditional, active-duty components realized they could no longer do their primary mission at any sizable scale without the National Guard.”

South Dakota Army Guard engineer, artillery, logistics, medical, and aviation units would see the majority of rotational deployments into the Afghanistan and Iraq theaters of operation. The Air Guard would also see the regular deployment of its airmen from its 114th Fighter Wing, including its security forces, F-16 pilots, engineers, logistics and many other support personnel.

These units supported the war effort in a variety of capacities by providing command and control of units, force protection, security and air support, clearing roads of IEDs, medical services and evacuation, logistical coordination and maintenance, transportation of supplies and equipment, engineer and base construction projects, detainee operations, and more.

Many SDNG members would also support embedded training teams and other security focused missions – to train Afghan and Iraqi army and police forces. These missions were part of a broader multi-national effort to help stabilize and secure the countries, deny terrorist organizations a safe haven from which to operate, and provide freedom and liberties to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan... where our men and women in uniform were deployed in harm’s way,” said Bray, who took an assignment at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, as the National Guard liaison and subsequently as the deputy commanding general, assisting in the preparation, deployment, and redeployment of thousands of soldiers to and from Iraq, Afghanistan, and all over the globe.

“On those journeys, I observed a transformation in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2006, I observed no lights at the homes of the people as I flew over (Afghanistan). No commerce. Few schools, especially for girls,” Bray continued. “By 2010, I observed lights at night at their homes. I observed bustling commerce on the roads. Most importantly, girls were going to school. Progress was being made because Americans were there to advise and support.”

Over the last 20 years, 4,600 SDNG soldiers and airmen deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, Spartan Shield and Inherent Resolve; nearly 2,300 deployed in support of operations Enduring Freedom and Freedom’s Sentinel; and over 1,100 would provide support to Operation Noble Eagle.

SDNG deployments were not limited to the Middle East. Over 1,300 service members would support other active-duty rotational deployments stateside and overseas; largely supporting regional security and support operations in over two dozen countries throughout Europe, Southwest Asia and more.

As the SDNG kept up with federal deployment requirements, they also maintained their ability to support state missions. This included a variety of assistance and recovery support to Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, Haiti earthquake, Missouri River flood, Wessington Springs and Delmont tornados, Winter Storm Atlas, COVID-19 pandemic, Black Hills wildland fires and more.

“The Guard proved its worth once again and continues to do so for both its state and federal missions. Our nation and our Department of Defense learned, again, the Guard is essential,” Bray said. “Additionally, a new generation of veterans has been born in conflict. A veteran can and will never forget the duty, sacrifice, and honor they experienced and earned.”

In the early 2000s, the SDNG resided in 30 communities across the state, today it is in 21 communities. Every one of those South Dakota communities would experience a unit mobilization – with many units, and service members, deploying multiple times. With the deployments came challenges and sacrifices, not just for the service members, but for families as well.

“One of the biggest challenges was the time spent away from my family,” said Weber. “Not just for deployment but also in training and preparation. The other probably even greater challenge occurred upon return from deployment. Not only was I different but my family was different. They helped me adjust back into life and dealt with many of the issues related to my deployment that continued to surface overtime.”

“I was fortunate to have employers that were supportive of my military service,” Duba said. “I was also blessed to have a wife and family that stepped up and kept the home fires burning on my frequent periods of being away.”

“I had tremendous support from my family, community, and employers through each of my three deployments to Iraq,” said Bauman. “The greatest sacrifices come from children and spouses at home.”

“Being in the military, you miss out on birthdays, anniversaries, and important moments in your loved ones lives,” Berndt added. “They are the ones that keep everything moving and take care of things when you’re at training or deployed.”

“The time these events has caused our service member to be apart from our family has been challenging,” said Walker, whose husband, Chief Warrant Officer 5 Wayne Walker, has been deployed five times since 9/11. “However, we have both seen positive changes in how the National Guard has been able to make this time apart easier for all to handle.”

Another impact to the National Guard was the creation of the Yellow Ribbon Program, Family Readiness Groups and other support programs to assist service members and their families during deployment periods and throughout their military service. These programs help ensure service member and family

readiness by providing information and resources on healthcare, education, employment, and financial and legal benefits.

“The Yellow Ribbon events, the Family Readiness Groups, Military One Source, has provided so much support for both service members and their families during the separation,” Walker said. “Our family has learned we are more resilient than we ever imagined we could be. We are so proud of all our soldiers and the sacrifices we all have had to make to still keep us all safe!”

Although the greatest sacrifice came from those service members who suffer from the physical and mental wounds of war, and those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to their nation. Thirty-six of South Dakota’s sons and daughters across the various branches of the military have given their lives over the past 20 years in support of the Global War on Terror. Eight of those are SDNG soldiers: Sgt. Dennis Morgan, Staff Sgt. Cory Brooks, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Paul Pillen, Sgt. 1st Class Richard Schild, Staff Sgt. Daniel Cuka, Sgt. Allen Kokesh, Staff Sgt. Gregory Wagner and Spc. Dennis Jensen.

As the nation marks the 20th anniversary of 9/11, these SDNG members, and many who wore and continue to wear this country’s uniform, are proud of their service to their nation, the people they served with, and the missions they performed – to protect and defend America and what it stands for.

“It was truly an honor to have served with some of the greatest women and men, soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines from South Dakota, all over these United States and around the world,” said Weber. “We served together in peace and in combat – during some of the most trying times and seemingly dire experiences.”

“Since 9/11, I’ve had the unique opportunity to train thousands of soldiers who eventually were deployed to the conflicts that the U.S. Army has been engaged with since,” Serna said. “I can only say it was a privilege to have seen their resolve and patriotism having joined the military service of a nation at war. These folks had no doubt that they were likely to be asked to deploy, and still enlisted into the Guard.”

“I’ve been asked, ‘Was it worth it?’ many times during my military career since that fateful day. I’ve been asked it by grieving parents and spouses, by colleagues, and by friends and acquaintances.” Bray said, who served over 41 years in uniform. “I’ve come to realize there is no real way to adequately respond without leaving some doubt, something yet unanswered.

“Marine Gen. John Kelly once said, ‘It didn’t matter what I thought. It doesn’t matter what the living think,’” Bray continued. Gen. Kelly’s son was killed in Afghanistan. “What mattered was what his son had thought. And he was doing what he wanted to do – leading Marines in combat. ‘Was it worth his life?’ Kelly asked. ‘It’s not for me to say.’ Was it worth it? Americans ask this question so flippantly – it seems they forget the sacrifice behind those words or what it would mean to our nation if the answer was ‘no.’ If Americans don’t think that’s worth fighting for, then I fear for the future of our country.

“While I still have no personally satisfying response for that question, ‘Was it worth it?’ I believe Gen. Kelly came as close to what should console loved ones and American’s alike, ‘It’s not for me to say,’” Bray added. “Is fighting to keep our country safe and bring stability and democracy to a country that was once ruled by terror? That is worth fighting for!”

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**100510-A-5804M-009:** Soldiers of the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade board an airplane as the unit departs for a year-long deployment to Afghanistan, May 10, 2010, in Sioux Falls, S.D. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Julieanne Morse)



**010101-Z-A3566-001:** An airman with the 114th Fighter Wing fuels an F-16 Fighting Falcon at Joe Foss Field in Sioux Falls, S.D., in September, 2001. Following the 9/11 attacks, crews from the 114th were on alert for possible immediate missions to support the country's air defenses.



**020704-Z-A3566-001:** Soldiers with the South Dakota National Guard stand guard near Mount Rushmore, S.D., in 2002.



**080908-F-3188G-093:** Airmen and soldiers from the 114th Fighter Wing and Bravo Battery, 1-147th Field Artillery Battalion, pose for a photo with some of their aircraft and vehicles while stationed at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, Sept. 8, 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Erik Gudmunson)



**060710-Z-A3566-001:** Soldiers from Charlie Battery, 1-147th Field Artillery Battalion, administer first aid to an Iraqi civilian, July 2006, in Iraq.



**100804-Z-A3566-001:** Soldiers of the 211th Engineer Company detonate a roadside improvised explosive device used by the Taliban during a route clearance mission in Paktika Province, Afghanistan, Aug. 4, 2010. (U.S. Army photo)



**070929-Z-A3566-001:** Lt. Col. Harvey Fitzgerald visits with an Iraqi man, Sept. 29, 2007, near Al-Taji, Iraq, as he and fellow Provincial Reconstruction Team members assist provincial and local governments to develop a transparent and sustained capability to govern while supporting economic, political, and social development and respect for the rule of law. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. David Parker)



**060721-F-4961B-004:** Senior Airman Eric Kloster, deployed from the South Dakota Air National Guard at Sioux Falls, stands his post at an entry control point into the Sather Air Base, Iraq, July 21, 2006. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Bryan Bouchard)



**100731-F-9119C-934:** The 114th Fighter Wing's Capt. Eric Cleveringa prepares to launch an F-16 Fighting Falcon for a mission July 31, 2010, from Joint Base Balad, Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Caycee Cook)



**080801-A-2998H-001:** South Dakota National Guard Embedded Training Team member Staff Sgt. Adam Herman provides weapons training to an Afghan policeman in August 2008 near the village of Gorwach in northwest Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Darnell Hubbard)



**101119-A-9937D-008:** Col. Ashok Kumar, a physician with the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, examines 13-year-old Afghan girl Safoora Nov. 19, 2010, as her father watches, at the Camp Phoenix medical clinic in Kabul, Afghanistan, after a recent operation she received to remove a tumor from the middle of her brain. Kumar helped to coordinate the necessary resources and medical contacts Safoora needed in order to have a chance at living a healthy and normal life. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Anthony Deiss)



**110826-A-CW157-002:** The South Dakota Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Team holds the United States flag over Spc. Dennis Jensen's casket during his interment at the Black Hills National Cemetery in Sturgis S.D., Aug. 26, 2011. Jensen died in a non-combat related accident near Camp Leatherneck in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Theanne Tangen)



**141007-Z-CW157-120:** Spc. Bailey Slaby with the 172nd Transportation Company is greeted by her family during the unit's welcome home ceremony, Oct. 7, 2014, in Sioux Falls, S.D., following a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class Theanne Tangen)



**181103-Z-CW157-120:** Airmen from the 114th Fighter Wing are greeted by their families, Nov. 3, 2018, in Sioux Falls, S.D., as unit members returned from a deployment to Southwest Asia. (U.S. Air National Guard photo)



**141007-Z-CW157-377:** Hundreds of family, friend and community supports attend the welcome home ceremony of the 172nd Transportation Company, Oct. 7, 2014, at the Sanford Pentagon in Sioux Falls, S.D., following a unit's nine-month deployment to Afghanistan. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class Theanne Tangen)