



A CORPORATE COMMITMENT TO OUR GUARD AND RESERVE

Photos by Bill Doty & Tom McMahon

ON GUARD

New Mexico units show their stuff during Bosslift exercise

Suddenly, the F-16 is just *there*. I'm lying in a prone position on a bench at the tail end of a KC-135 aerial tanker looking out a small window. Beside me, "Boomer," an Air National Guard sergeant and refueling boom operator from an Ohio Guard unit, looks over at me and gives a slight nod and smile. I'm the civilian newbie here and he's saying to me, without words, "This is cool, isn't it?"

Yes it is. Boomer, hands on a panel of controls, deftly flies the refueling boom — yes, flies; the business end of the hose includes small winglets that aid in positioning — into the receiving port on the F-16. He's in visual communication with the F-16 pilot; the cockpit of the New Mexico Air National Guard fighter aircraft isn't more than 50 feet from our window. We're close enough that you can see the intensity of the pilot's concentration as he keeps the F-16 straight and level and exactly synced to the speed of the tanker.

Boomer's in constant voice contact with the pilot. Though I can't make out the individual words, I can hear him speaking in the low, slow, confident cadences of a man who knows what he's doing and has done it thousands of times before.

A flight of four F-16s from the New Mexico Air National Guard has been flying along with the tanker on a short hop from Kirtland Air Force Base to Cannon AFB in Clovis. The purpose of the flight is to practice (and frankly, to show off) the Guard's aerial refueling capabilities — and to impress those of us who don't see this stuff every day.

We're impressed. That Ohio Guard unit, the 121st Aerial Refueling Wing, has dispatched the KC-135 to New Mexico to support an annual event called Bosslift, which is intended to showcase New Mexico Guard and Reserve capabilities to local business and civic leaders.

Bosslift is staged by the New Mexico Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) program. Sandia has been invited along on Bosslift because it is widely recognized as one of the state's best — that is, most enlightened — employers of Guard and Reserve members. Altogether, about 100 people from businesses around the state have joined in the Bosslift exercise.

The morning had started out with briefings at KAFB about New Mexico's Guard and Reserve capabilities. Steve Stevens, a retired brigadier general and head of New Mexico ESGR, brags on the caliber of Guard and Reserve members and argues that compared to the nation's regular military services, the Guard and Reserve deliver at "pennies on the dollar."

"We think we're a pretty good bargain for your tax dollar," he says. New Mexico Air National Guard commander Col. Jay Bledsoe speaks next. He looks like the one-time Detroit Lion he was, a big, rangy guy whose cockpit callsign is "Bluto." (If you know *Animal House*, that handle probably tells you something about Bledsoe.) He tells us that his unit — our neighbors and colleagues in the workplace — are "fully integrated in the war on terror. Our operational tempo is very high . . . we've never been busier."

In Clovis, we get more briefings on Guard and Reserve activities, both at home and in the global war on terror (New Mexico Guard and Reserve units are routinely deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan). During a banquet, Brig. Gen. Kenny Montoya, adjutant general of the New Mexico National Guard, tells us that he's proud of the moniker "weekend warriors," emblematic as it is of neighbors and work colleagues who have answered the nation's call to serve.

On Bosslift day two, we're bused out to Melrose Range near Clovis to watch F-16s do practice bombing and strafing runs, then see an Army Guard unit do a rescue mission of a downed pilot while coming under fire from a band of insurgents.

As we board the KC-135 for the flight home, all we can talk about is how impressed we are with everything we've seen. To a person, we're convinced that our New Mexico Guard and Reserve members — including soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who work shoulder to shoulder with us at Sandia — are, as Steve Stevens said during a briefing, "a cut above the average."

— Bill Murphy



BRIG. GEN. (RET) Steve Stevens (center), chairman of the New Mexico Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve program, visits with Guard and Reserve members from (left to right) the New Mexico Air National Guard, the Navy Reserve, the Marine Reserve, and the New Mexico Army National Guard.



ON TARGET — A New Mexico Air National Guard F-16 (left) wheels away after dropping a dummy bomb on a target (right) at the Melrose Range near Clovis, N.M. The target aircraft are plywood mockups.



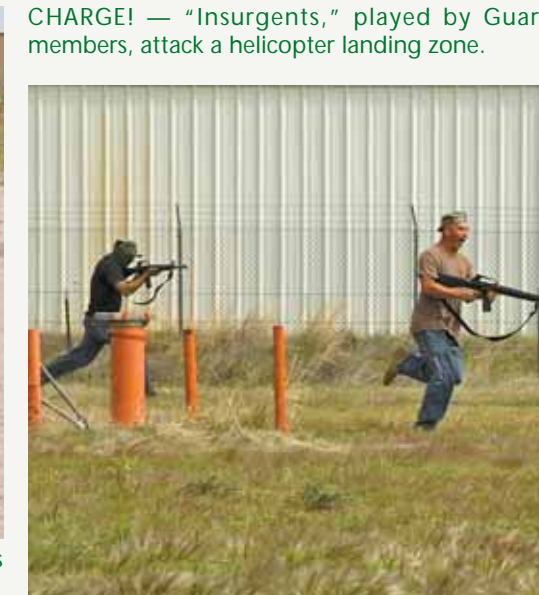
ARMY NATIONAL GUARD members (above) discuss how they will deploy to protect a landing zone for an air rescue mission. In the sequence of photos below, a Guard helicopter drops into a hot zone to recover a downed pilot.



FILL 'ER UP — An NMANG F-16 moves into position below a KC-135 aerial refueling aircraft in the skies high above New Mexico.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE — A Marine Reserve recon unit exhibits some of the gear it uses in carrying out its mission.



CHARGE! — "Insurgents," played by Guard members, attack a helicopter landing zone.



A NM GUARD member in combat face paint.



TAKE FIVE — Guard members take a break before a firefight demonstration.