

Initiatives Ease Burden Borne By Reservists and Their Families

By PETER ATKINSON, Deputy Editor

Since 9/11, the notion of the Reservist as “week-end warrior” has largely gone by the wayside. Mobilizations, first in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and, later, Operation Iraqi Freedom and other missions, saw more than 100,000 sea service Reservists called up for long-term active duty on the other side of the world or performing support duty here and abroad.

Such a surge had not been seen since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and as it stretches into its second decade, many Reservists and their families are experiencing significant stress as their home and work lives are disrupted for prolonged periods by their service to the country.

As the services do what they can to ease this stress, both in preparing Reservists for deployment and smoothing the transition upon their return, support from service and community organizations like the Navy League can be particularly helpful. There are ample opportunities to lend a hand, be it through welcoming home returning Reservists, honoring individual augmentees (IAs) or volunteering to be part of the Safe Harbor/Anchor program partnership to assist wounded warriors.

As of May 18, 6,399 Navy, 6,724 Marine Corps and 834 Coast Guard Reservists were mobilized — although the Coast Guard level nearly doubled soon thereafter because of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response — according to Reserve component statistics compiled for a third-quarter fiscal 2010 report prepared by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs.

While the numbers are down considerably from levels that spiked just after 9/11 and during the height of Iraq war “surge” in 2007-08, Reservists continue to fill critical vacancies as IAs — often with a different military service — in deployed units, assist with humanitarian and disaster relief missions, provide day-to-day support services and respond to emergency situations.

According to Vice Adm. Dirk J. Debbink, chief of Navy Reserve and commander, Navy Reserve Force, “it’s going to be busy” for the foreseeable future for his Reservists.

“We’ve maintained where we’ve been for the last two years, which is somewhere around 6,500 and 7,000 on mobilization at any one time,” he said during an interview at his Pentagon office, which overlooks the memorial to the victims of American Airlines Flight 77 that was crashed into the building on 9/11. “And that hasn’t changed a whole lot, even though we have drawn down



El-Brenda Wiley, a psychological health outreach program counselor, advises Ensign Chris Love, a member of the Reserve component assigned to Navy Cargo Handling Battalion 4, and his wife during a Pre-Deployment Family Readiness Conference (PDFRC) in Charlotte, N.C., Sept. 18. The PDFRC program was begun last year to help ready Reservists and their families for deployments and inform them about available resources.

quite a bit in Iraq and with fewer mobilizations to Kuwait. We have ramped up in Afghanistan to absorb some of that.

“In addition to that, we have about 13,000-14,000 other Sailors who are doing some type of operational support on shorter-term orders, so at any given time about 20,000 of the 65,000 of our force is on some kind of active duty.”

On Oct. 1, Debbink issued a 2011 update to “Ready Now: The Navy Reserve Strategic Plan.” Now in its third year of execution, the plan serves as the blueprint for building the Navy Reserve so it can effectively and efficiently carry out its mission. This year’s strategic plan lays out 12 initiatives, most of which focus on professional opportunities, training and readiness concerns.

“Much of what we had been doing was shaping the environment, now we are really targeting and attacking initiatives that are going to make a real meaningful difference in the lives of our Sailors and their family members,” he said.

“Last time, we started out with 56 initiatives. A lot of tough spade work needed to get done, a lot of learning needed to get done so that we could commit to the

important parts of the plan, so we could get to the doing parts in the end.”

One notable initiative calls for “world-class customer service” to improve the service Reserve Sailors, their families and employers receive from the Navy and Navy Reserve during mobilizations “to increase transparency so problem areas can be seen and fixed,” according to the plan.

“There are always ways we can improve,” Debbink said. “What we have been focusing on for the past year is some of those issues of how we can better support the family members. As I reflect back on those early days, we pushed our Sailors forward without near as much support as they deserve.”

To provide more of that support, the Navy Reserve has implemented several initiatives over the past couple years. In 2006, the Returning Warrior Workshop program was begun to help Navy and Marine Reservists coming back from service in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere re-acclimate and re-integrate into civilian life. The two-day workshops are held in a retreat-like setting.

“That event is a really high-impact event,” Debbink said. “It’s high impact because these Sailors and their loved one or designated representative are at a state of mind where they are receptive and they’re eager to find out more about what we can do to help them, and they are also with other Sailors and other loved ones who have gone through the same experience. So it is a really good time to engage them in really meaningful ways.”

Navy League councils have been supporting these workshops almost from the beginning. Great Lakes Region councils volunteered to partner with the Navy Region Midwest Reserve Component Command in 2008 and the effort has continued to grow ever since.

“Almost every one I go to I see Navy League councils there,” Debbink said. “They are really engaged.”

More than 20 Returning Warrior Workshops are scheduled throughout the country in 2011 [See list].

More recently, a Pre-Deployment Family Readiness Conference (PDFRC) program kicked off to help ready Reservists and their families for deployments and inform them about available resources.

“Returning Warrior Workshops are run by the [Regional Reserve Component Commands], and we focus there on Sailors who have IA’d, for Sailors who have gone [on deployment]. PDFRC is for every Sailor, to prepare every Sailor for the ‘what if.’ Our motto is: ‘Ready Now, Any Time, Any Where,’ so we really want everybody to be ready now.

“We’re trying to help our Sailors and their families set the right expectations for deployments, and we’re also trying to give them the tools and the knowledge and the skills that they’ll need. ... Overarching, it’s about supporting our Sailors and their families. At both events, we

do try to link them up with Navy League, the VA [Department of Veteran Affairs], with the Department of Labor for job-type stuff, ESGR [Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve].”

When Sailors and family members from Navy Operational Support Center (NOSC) Whidbey Island, Wash., participated in their PDFRC on Sept. 11, the event was held in conjunction with the annual Military Appreciation Picnic sponsored in part by the Navy League’s Oak Harbor Council. They were joined by a number of demobilized Reservists and their families, who were cited for their service with plaques, coins and certificates of appreciation by Cmdr. Johnny Miller, commander of the NOSC, and Whidbey Island Mayor Jim Slowik.

It was ninth year for the picnic, and the second in which the Reserve component was the focus, according to Beth Munns, a national director with the Oak Harbor Council and a founder of the event.

Developing programs and support services to keep pace with the operational tempo of the past decade has largely been a learning-by-doing process for Reserve officials from all of the services, Debbink said. The key now is to retain that knowledge and continuing to push it forward.

“It’s really important to understand how to best deliver programs,” he said. “The process works pretty well, now that we’ve got it refined. [What] we’re really trying to focus on is how do you institutionalize what we’ve learned, preserve what we’ve learned?” ■

2011 Returning Warrior Workshops

U.S. Navy Regional Reserve Component Commands and Marine Forces Reserve have scheduled more than 20 Returning Warrior Workshops for 2011.

Charlotte, N.C. Jan. 28-30	Akron, Ohio April 8-10	Seattle Sept. 23-25
Nashville, Tenn. Jan. 28-30	Boston April 8-10	Puerto Rico Sept. 24-26
Pensacola, Fla. Jan. 28-30	Mobile, Ala. May 13-15	Oklahoma City, Okla. Oct. 14-16
Waikiki, Hawaii Feb 11-13	San Francisco May 20-22	Baltimore Oct. 21-23
Portland, Ore. March 11-13	Jackson Hole, Wyo. July 8-10	Sacramento, Calif. Oct. 21-23
St. Louis March 18-20	Minneapolis July 15-17	West Palm Beach, Fla. Dec. 2-4
San Diego March 25-27	Burlington, Vt. July 22-24	Portland, Ore. Dec. 2-4
Tampa, Fla. March 25-27	Austin, Texas July 22-24	
Washington April 1-3		