



THIS ISN'T YOUR FATHER'S NATIONAL GUARD

By Mike Flaherty, Pete Helzer and Ron Granieri August 18, 2020
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. The National Guard embodies a particular American tradition of the citizen soldier taking as its model, quite literally in its iconography, the Minuteman of the colonial militias, the Guard is a reserve force made up largely of soldiers and airmen who have full-time civilian jobs as well that stands ready to mobilize in defense of local communities against a variety of threats from natural disasters to civil unrest and have also been deployed overseas during America's longest wars. The complexity of serving in uniform and holding down a civilian job is just one part of the challenges facing the National Guard. Even as the nation depends on the Guard, the Guard's command structures run through the individual states and territories comprising fifty-four different organizations which places unique limits on promotions and assignments. Based in part on mutual unfamiliarity, the Guard's relationship with the Army is also not always as seamless as either would like. So, to help us understand better the role of the National Guard and the way that it shapes the careers of the Guardsmen and the way that it works with the Army, we have two guests today, and those guests are **Lieutenant Colonel Peter Helzer** from Oregon and **Lieutenant Colonel Michael Flaherty** from Ohio who are both students in the current resident program at the U.S. Army War College and Officers in the National Guard. Welcome, gentleman, to A Better Peace.

Peter Helzer: Hi, Ron. Thanks.

Michael Flaherty: Hi, Ron. Thank you very much, great to be here.

RG: It's good to have you both here. So, I'm curious. I always like to start when I talk to current students at the War College, how would you describe your experience this year at the War College?

MF: I would start out by saying, dynamic, given the current events going on and with going from in-class resident to virtual learning, it's almost akin to doing distance learning for ILE and the other things that we've done in our Guard careers.

PH: It's been a fantastic year so far. Like every other experience I've had coming together with a group of soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines from across the country, you make friends pretty quickly and this has been a fantastic experience to study things that I wouldn't ordinarily have the opportunity to pay a lot of attention to.

RG: That's really good. I have to say—I guess I should say for our audiences—this is the first recording of A Better Peace that has been done under the new conditions of the Coronavirus and so, for a change, all three of us are in different, secure, separate locations maintaining our social distance from each other which has made for a very interesting year for the War College especially for the resident program where we're not all currently resident in Carlisle but, that being said, I am curious then, for the for the two of you as Guard Officers in the resident program, you get to meet your counterparts in other branches, also in the Army and even in the other services, what one thing do each of you wish your colleagues here at the War College, your fellow students either in the Army or in other branches, knew about the Guard.

PH: I suppose I'll start with that one. You know the unique dynamic of having a civilian career and putting that and family aside for an extended period to go whether it's a combat deployment, whether it's a resident course like this that's ten months long and those other periods of time where we're taken away from our normal. The active-duty folks that we get to spend time with and really a lot of the civilian students as well, they're used to uprooting everything every couple of years, moving their household wholesale, and we deal with family members, with careers and businesses that don't get to just get put on hold every time the military calls.

RG: Right. And Mike, would you say that's been your experience as well?

MF: Oh absolutely, and you know one of the things that General Johnson who's at the National Guard Bureau in the Army National Guard has always talked about is the unique equities of the National Guard and the multiple demands on servicemembers time, not only the full-time National Guard Staff but also the traditional Guardsmen which we call the M-Day Guardsmen. So, when we talk to our active-duty counterparts and we talk about the capabilities, let's just say of a brigade combat team that should have a certain level of capability to meet a certain mission set, although true on paper in terms of getting a capable organization that can efficiently and effectively accomplish those missions, the lead time that we consider is generally in five to six year increments. So, when we just think about the scale and what I try to communicate with my active-duty counterparts is, okay, I recognize that you want something, I need to know at least three, ideally five years out, when you need it, how much of it you need it, and how long you're

going to need it for. So, that's always a constant tension between the National Guard component and our regular Army counterparts is just in terms of the time scale from demand to actually getting everything aligned so that you have the right people in the right place at the right time to deliver the capability that the nation needs.

RG: What kind of time frame has the Guard faced for its overseas deployments to places like Afghanistan and Iraq?

MF: Well, I can take that. From my personal perspective, the battalion that I just left command, we deployed to the CENTCOM theater of operations you know for nine months in 2017. The flash to bang in terms of what that was about ten months and because of the mission set, because of the mission set that was an adequate amount of time given the history of the organization selected to do that mission. Going back to the 2011 timeframe, the last time I deployed with that organization in a different role, they had about eighteen months. Going back even further, the organization had nine months. In each instance you had different posts, mobilization training time associated with the type of mission. Was it adequate? Depends who you ask. In terms of the performance at the when we were actually doing the missions, everything that you would expect to happen for an organization that didn't have a lot of time, you know, storming, norming, conforming and becoming a very coherent organization, we felt that in theater because when you don't do that job all the time, all those hidden things that you just don't think about when you're doing your civilian job you did today, start to emerge as personalities come together, as different mission sets come in. So, it's different.

RG: Well, and I'm curious, when you mention a deployment in 2017, a deployment in 2011 and an earlier deployment, is about 6 years between deployments, for overseas deployments for a Guard unit, is that unusual? I am curious how often a Guard unit finds itself deployed overseas as opposed to an active-duty unit.

PH: The frequency of these deployments really kind of varies. Mike's experience at roughly 6 year stretches at battalion level fits with the experience we've had in Oregon for that size of a unit deployment, but the other thing that we've seen across the state is some element from company size through brigade size being deployed once a year and often overlapping over the last, you know, fifteen to twenty years of the Global War on Terror. So, depending on what level of organization you work in, what your rank is, what your specialty is, our medevac company in Oregon deploys fairly frequently in some structure or another, whereas the infantry brigade combat team was deployed in 2009-2010, that headquarters is forward right now. And so, for that level of structure, you know, maybe more like ten years is the norm, and then as far as the flash to bang time, your combat deployments, six months to eighteen months' notice is pretty common. But then your natural disaster stuff, when they sent the 41st to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, we got about five days.

RG: Right. And I was thinking that too. So, deployed within your state could be even shorter than that, right? What does that do then for your civilian soldier, citizen soldier? They get the notice that the unit is going to be deployed either to New Orleans or to Baghdad. What kind of choices then, what kind of decisions do the individual Guardsmen have to make in a situation like that? And what kind of relationship does one have to have with one civilian employer in those circumstances.

PH: Well that tends to vary by your employer. I'm fortunate to have a government job. The City of Portland has been very supportive of my military career over the years. I know folks who are self-employed, own their own companies and well, they certainly have the flexibility to deal with themselves as their employer, their business suffers, and in many cases, that can be unrecoverable. Beyond the impact on us for these things on our families, is that relationship with the employer. They are less, shall we say, part of the decision cycle than we are. We're the ones that signed up. I was a soldier when I met my wife, so you hate to use that line, she knew what she was getting into, but it wasn't a complete surprise.

RG: Well have either of you ever had a conversation with men under your command or even in your own experience where they were either changing jobs or looking for a job and they found that an employer wanted to know whether they were in the Guard and that that may have gotten in the way of them getting or keeping a particular job?

MF: Unofficially, yes. Simply because an employer cannot deny employment based on National Guard service members' status. So, simply because you're in the National Guard, employers technically can't ask that question number one, and it should not play a part in terms of their hiring. Reality is that, less so today, now that the demand for Army forces around the world don't dip into the National Guard as much as it was during the surge in 2008/2009 and we can actually, in the National Guard and the National Command Authority has actually evaluated the impact that unpredictability has on both service members, their families and employers. So, we in Ohio, and I had spent some time in the National Guard in Pennsylvania, those leaders of the National Guard and the respective Governor's offices, do a great amount of work in trying to work with employers to ensure that they understand the demands on the servicemembers' lives, how that might impact their availability for their employment and criticality depending on the role that they perform at their job. And then, you know, part of it goes back to the individual service member in their commitment to being an actual professional member of the military organization versus what they need to do to continue to progress in their company or the business that they serve. So, there is a constant tension between service member family and employer and then the personal goals of the individual service member.

RG: Right. And that gets to that question of promotion and advancement within the Guard as well. I think we spoke before we recorded that one of the challenges in the Guard is that your path to promotion can be limited by the size of the National Guard in your state and how exactly does that change the career path that someone can choose to have within the Guard depending on the state they're in and the specialty of the units that they are assigned to in the Guard.

MF: It goes back to perspective. I think Pete and I are both kind of fortunate that we have brigade combat team headquarters and rather large National Guard organizations. Ohio is number four in the country...

RG: Is that right?

MF: ...in terms of the size of the National Guard. Yes. So, you got California, Texas, Pennsylvania, Ohio. The top four in terms of size. There is greater flexibility depending on their military occupation specialty. But even within a state as big as Ohio, we do have some specialized units, our chemical battalion and the one, the single chemical company that we have in the state. So, that pyramid in terms of non-commissioned officers and officers gets very, very steep in terms of past the company grade, the lieutenants and captains or the field grade, the majors, lieutenant colonels becomes very steep, so when you have a very high performing leader and soldier that is looking for additional opportunities to do something within the National Guard at a higher level of responsibility, they have to make a decision to potentially change their branch if they're an officer or a warrant officer, or change their occupational specialty, and then that's why you may see National Guard service members with up to six or seven occupational specialties for the Army or the Air Force specialty code, the AFSC in the Air National Guard.

RG: Interesting. And it is not—actually I should rephrase the question—is it possible for a member of the Guard to... if a member of the Guard moves from state to state in civilian life, does one take one's rank with one from Texas to Oregon to Ohio or does that get more complicated in the Guard than it would in the Army?

PH: The short answer to that is yes, we all have reserve commissions in the United States Army or Air Force as the case may be, and so our rank is federally recognized. When we're activated, Mike and I have the same status as a lieutenant colonel right now than any active component officer that we're in a seminar with, and so that part will stay with you should you need to move from state to state. Your service record goes with you as well. Where you may face some challenges is in the relationship aspect of things. The Guard being community-based tends to not have as much flux with people moving in and out, and so in an active-duty unit, everybody is a stranger when they first show up, within the Guard, you tend to be more of a known quantity within your state. And so, somebody coming from Washington, Idaho, California, New York, D.C., to the Oregon Guard, they're going to need to establish some relationships and have their

work product, work ethic, etc., become a known quantity in order to be more competitive for positions, desired positions or advancement.

RG: Well, and while we're talking about relationships. How have both of you seen the relationship between the Guard and your personal experience and big army either when you're at the War College or in your practical, in your professional life up to now? What's that relationship like? Go ahead, Mike. I will say for the record, I'm not trying to pick a fight between the Army and the Guard, but I am curious how you feel about how that relationship works and what could make it work better.

MF: Yeah, the tensions between the National Guard or rather the reserves writ large and the regular Army have been persistent since 1916 when we did the punitive campaign into Mexico and then the states fought against the federal government in terms of whether you can use the National Guard to go outside of the United States and then in terms of the time available, how much time does it take a National Guard Reserve component organization to be competent to deploy in a mission set that's very intense. National Guard divisions during World War II took as much as eighteen months and then there was tension between who should lead, should it be a regular army officer? Can we rely on this National Guard army officer who has a different set of experiences but just as much time in total service? And that tension has perpetuated itself. You look at the Gulf War where you had two brigade combat teams that although they were mobilized, they did not deploy. Again, there's a lot of reasons for why they didn't and if you have a national guard perspective, you can look at it as, it's because the regular army didn't want to give the opportunity or from a regular army perspective, it was just the assessment based on where they were at that time did not give confidence to the leaders to actually deploy them into an environment which could potentially be catastrophic in terms of loss of life if they were not fully trained. I think we've come a long way based on the relationships that have been developed between the National Guard Reserve and the Federal Army Reserve and the regular Army to increase the amount of training available to the reserve component members throughout their life cycle within their respective components and because of that, units that deploy at company, battalion size and sometimes a little bit less than brigade, you know, three to four thousand depending on the mission set, I'm confident that the regular Army and the decision-makers in terms of global force management are much more comfortable today than say fifteen, obviously twenty years ago in doing that.

RG: And would you say that's the product of experience?

MF: At the end of the day what I've experienced... Absolutely.

RG: That's the product of experience? Pete, what do you think?

PH: I think Mike brings up a really great point there. I've said this in seminar before as well. My twenty years of commission service out of my twenty-three total looks very different than a seminar mate who graduated from West Point in 1999 or 2000. They have got a lot more reps doing the combat stuff, doing that federal mission, you know, the mission essential task list stuff, whereas they have not by and large gone and coordinated response with civil authorities to floods, forest fires, they don't bring that additional skill set to bear in the coin environment. When you've got engineer companies from the Guard of folks who are skilled tradesman outside plumbers, electricians, etc., they're able to bring a whole other wealth of experience to that mission set than somebody who has only laid wire minefields and done that type of engineer mission, and there's a spectrum of tasks to be completed.

RG: Right. So in general, we can say that the National Guard is not identical to the Army, to the active-duty Army, but each group, each unit can bring part of its special experience to bear to enrich the larger mission for both. What will you take with you when you go back from your experience at the War College back to your unit? Just at the beginning of this discussion I asked you what you thought that people here needed to know about the Guard. When you go back to your Guard units, what will you bring from your War College experience either about your understanding of the Army or your understanding about the Guard's place in the larger enterprise? I'll start with Mike.

MF: So, what I'm taking back is just a better appreciation of the constant tensions between the force structure, the force-mix and the force employment, especially as we transition to whatever this next phase of global competition and what that might look like going to the future and the dynamics, the environmental dynamics that impact how we think about the problems. And then as we look at the future force, multi-domain operations, what the most multi-domain task force is going to experiment on and then bring back from concept and then how doctrine changes. We are definitely, just my personal perspective, at another inflection point in the National Guard, regular Army history to redefine what we need, where it needs to be allocated in terms of the reserve component in the regular Army, and we're going to have to make strategic decisions that's going to impact the National Guard across the states, and although you know from a state perspective, each state is going to want to retain a certain level of National Guard force structure and total number of national guardsmen within the state. But from a strategic perspective, it's going to be, some tough decisions are going to have to be made, and resting on the history of what the militia is, what the National Guard is, what it means to be a citizen soldier, that's going to change and we're going to have to adapt to that as to ensure that as a National Guard, we're able to fight America's wars, secure the homeland, and continue to build partnerships abroad.

RG: Nice. Pete, what would you like to add to that? What will you take back to your experience from the War College?

PH: That's hard to follow. Mike had a great answer there. For those of us in the Guard, aside from the relatively small number that work at National Guard Bureau and the Pentagon, most of us are familiar operating at division-level and below and even more prevalent than that is brigade and below, and so that bigger picture of the resources available, the opportunities for partnerships with active components, with the Federal Reserve, with other states, and how the international environment and resources can impact local decisions and just try to have that larger strategic view of things.

RG: Great. Well, gentlemen, I have to say I've really enjoyed having you in here for this conversation, our first completely remote conversation here on A Better Peace. There's a lot to consider about the relationship between citizens and soldiers and citizen soldiers and soldiers. I hope that this conversation has helped those of us listening to understand better both of the role of the National Guard and its relationship to the Army. I definitely want to thank Lieutenant Colonel Peter Helzer and Lieutenant Colonel Michael Flaherty for joining us today on A Better Peace.

MF: Thanks.

PH: Thanks, Ron.

RG: And thanks to all of you. You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please, send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future ideas. We're always interested to hear from you on our website, and until next time from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.