

Introduction

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Kirsten Barber: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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Season 4 Episode 6

Kirsten: The North Carolina National Guard is an all-volunteer force of around 10,000 soldiers and airmen who serve in both federal and state capacities. On order, the North Carolina National Guard deploys military capabilities in support of state and/or national authorities in order to protect the lives and properties of fellow citizens, defend the state and nation, and secure the American way of life. At the time of this recording, the adjutant general of the North Carolina National Guard is Todd Hunt. The TAG reports to the governor through the secretary of the Department of Public Safety.

Welcome to the Safety Scoop, everyone! I am here with Colonel Mark Almond with the North Carolina National Guard. This is the first time the Guard has been on the Safety Scoop, so we're really excited to have you here today to talk a little bit more and to help our listeners understand who the National Guard is and how they are associated with the Department of Public Safety.

Col. Mark Almond: Yeah, it's a pleasure to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to come and speak with you today. So, as you mentioned, my name is Colonel Mark Almond. I am,

uh, a member of the North Carolina National Guard. I've served for 29 years almost this coming August. I work full time for the North Carolina National Guard as a continuous process improvement/strategic planner, and then on my weekend job—which we'll get into a little bit later, the differences between the two—I'm the commander of the 139th regiment, one of our major subordinate commands here in the state.

Kirsten: And interested you or what made you decide to join the North Carolina National Guard 29 years ago?

Col. Almond: That's a really great question. Twenty-nine years ago, it was not because of any, uh, any experience; it was because I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and from the Reserve Officer Training Corp, and I received a commission in the United States Army. It was a Reserve or National Guard commission. I had a friend that worked in the National Guard. I picked up the phone, called him and he said, "Yep, I got a spot for you." So, I joined the National Guard back in, uh, 1996.

And the initial four to five years that I was in the Guard was, you know, learning about my job, learning how to be a—a field artillery officer and dealing with state active duties. And at that time, they were very few. And then 9/11 happened, and things changed. So, my interest became more from the technical and tactical side, uh, initially, as I completed four deployments, uh, in my 29 years. And now it's about serving the community and serving the—the National Guard to complete both federal and state missions.

Kirsten: Since you did just speak to state and federal missions, can you dive a little bit deeper into how the Guard operates within the state of North Carolina and then nationally?

Col. Almond: So, the North Carolina National Guard is statewide. We work for the Department of Public Safety, as well as the governor. Uh, during an emergency

disaster, we also work directly with the Emergency Management Department here in the state of North Carolina. So, we first serve the governor, and then we serve our federal mission. Our first mission is always to the state, and then we have the opportunity to serve, uh, the federal mission to the president of the United States, when called upon, for defending the constitution.

When we work for the state, uh, one of the best things that we do: mobilize to support the Incident Commander that's locally on the ground handling the emergency right there. We are integrated with the—that Incident Commander in his or her team and we—we support the citizens of North Carolina to, uh, to ensure that emergency is handled and managed effectively to ensure the public safety of the citizens of North Carolina [unintelligible].

Kirsten:

As Colonel Almond stated, the Always Ready - Ready Team, as declared in the Guard's mission statement, has postured itself to respond to any scenarios positioning members where they are needed most. These missions could call for dozens or even hundreds of members. In times of crisis, the Incident Commander, according to FEMA's incident command system, is the individual responsible for the overall management of an incident. Within North Carolina, that could be the director of Emergency Management, proxy or other government official for localized emergencies.

When you say, "support the citizens of North Carolina," what can that look like in the case of an emergency within North Carolina?

Col. Almond:

We have a plethora of options that we provide—can provide to Emergency Management. They're called Force Packages. These can range from human resources; logistical, uh, support; helicopter support; uh, to—to support the—the citizens or that Incident Commander. During Helene, we had, uh, a—a lot of different missions going on, and we were supporting across both from the Air side of the house as well as the Army side of the house throughout. During

COVID-19, we provided additional capacities there with medical assets that we have within our—our organization, as well.

Kirsten: So, National Guard members are referred to as citizen soldiers and airmen. Can you give our listeners an idea of exactly what that means?

Col. Almond: The National Guard was founded back in 1636, and it was based off of the farmer dropping his plow and walking straight to help, uh, picking up his rifle. And you can see that on The Minute Man statue that's out in front of our building. Uh, and it's community-based, so you were expected to rise up for your community to support as a minuteman, and that's how the National Guard traces its origin to.

Kirsten: The Minute Man statue that stands outside of the Joint Force Headquarters in Raleigh was installed in 2000 and is a replica of the famous bronze statue of the same name which is located in Concord, Massachusetts. The statue by sculptor Daniel Chester French was unveiled in 1875. It depicts a man dressed in colonial attire and hat staring confidently ahead. The man holds a rifle firmly in his right hand, and a knapsack rests at his feet. An inscription on the original statue includes the first stanza of the poem "The Concord Hymn" by Ralph Waldo Emerson. It reads:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag on April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The Minute Man has come to mean many things to many people. He stands as a reminder that sometimes our freedoms must be fought for and to never take them for granted. He has adorned the uniforms and flags of our nation's National Guard as they serve around the globe.

Col. Almond: So, here today, now, we still are a community-based organization. We have armories in the majority of the counties across the state, but we support all 100 counties within the state of North Carolina and the communities. Uh, soldiers and airmen live next door to you, and when the time calls and their name is picked for whether it's a federal or state mission, they rise from their communities to support their community.

Kirsten: What a perfect symbol for North Carolina, the farmer dropping his plow, a state so ingrained in the a-agriculture of this nation. That's—that's a really perfect symbol. So, once someone has enlisted in the National Guard, where can their career path go from that starting point?

Col. Almond: There's plenty of career opportunities within the Guard. You have a plethora, again—that's going to be the word of the day—of—of options and military occupational specialties for the Army as to what you can and can't do based off of, uh, taking the ASVAB, which is the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. Once you take that test, uh, your recruiter gives you an idea as to what jobs you qualify for and then, at the needs of the organization, what they recommend you join. Once you join a National Guard unit, uh, and you start getting your initial training, you learn leadership skills and can take your career path to continuing in that enlisted rank, or you can join the officer corps or an officer corps through various courses and training and additional training. So, you can go from a private to a command sergeant major or join as a second lieutenant, uh, and go to colonel or beyond in the general officer or W01, warrant officer one, to command chief warrant officer [unintelligible].

Kirsten: With this assessment that you are speaking of, are there any specific skills that are needed to join the North Carolina National Guard?

Col. Almond: Most of the positions in the Guard are based off of that ASVAB. We receive a force structure, uh, from the Department of the Army as to what units we're

going to have. Within those units, we have a variety of sp-specific job functions such as human resources, infantry, logistics, medical, aviation, public affairs, legal, religious service, armor mechanics (both fixed wing and rotary wing, as well as tracked vehicles and wheeled vehicles) and then, of course, my branch, the king of battle, artillery. Once you become a member, you go to your basic training. Whether it is, again, from the enlisted or the officer side, there's a—an entry level training. Once you complete your entry level training, you have advanced training where you actually specifically learn your skills. The basic training teaches you how to be in the Army. The advanced training teaches you your specific job function, and it gives you those—the how to conduct your operation or how to conduct your mission once you get to your unit.

When you arrive at your unit, that's where you're the backbone of the Army, the non-commissioned officer corps. Your supervisor really molds you and teaches you how to incorporate what you learned at your advanced training into how you do it in the field. How do you complete that for your federal mission? We never stop learning in the Army. Just because you go through those first initial courses, you have a—a very extensive professional military development. Even myself, 29 years, I complete courses on an annual basis to further develop myself as an officer, just like all the other soldiers and airmen out there.

Kirsten:

Within North Carolina state government, structurally speaking, the North Carolina National Guard falls under the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, as you stated earlier. How does the Guard assist with the department's overall public safety mission?

Col. Almond:

The North Carolina National Guard nests within the Department of Public Safety to support the citizens of North Carolina. We're one of the many assets for the director of Emergency Management during, uh, a crisis, for the secretary of public safety and the governor of North Carolina. We do support within our state boundaries primarily, but we can be called upon by other states if

necessary. But our focus is North Carolina. As I mentioned, we mobilize to support that Incident Commander within the town/cities/county level focused emergency management supporting those citizens. The Adjutant General Major General Todd Hunt is, uh, directly in communication with the director of Emergency Management, the secretary and the governor during crisis time to help provide the capabilities that we have to meet the needs of that Incident Commander on the ground.

Kirsten:

And so, when it goes beyond the state, can you go through what that mobilization looks like for the North Carolina National Guard when they are called on for assistance either to another state or by the president of the United States to go and assist with a mission?

Col. Almond:

So, from a federal perspective, the president of the United States through the secretary of defense requests forces from the governor. Once we get a notification of sourcing, which usually occurs about two years in advance, the governor and the adjutant general will confer and agree upon and support that mission. Then we start train-up leading towards the mobilization for those soldiers for—that particular unit. And we can do individual mobilizations, we can do partial-unit mobilizations or we can do a full-unit mobilization. We've done all those within the state. Since 9/11, the North Carolina National Guard has deployed over 40,000 soldiers and airmen, uh, in supportive missions both domestic and overseas.

Those mobilizations are typically, for the Army, about nine months with a two-month train-up time and a one-month demobilization time, so you typically are gone from your family about 12 months. The best part about it is we receive that notice about two years in advance, like I mentioned, so you have time to get your family affairs in place so that when you deploy, you're able to focus on your mission and not worry about your family as much because you know you've taken care of your family.

On a state mobilization, those typically are much shorter, usually seven to ten days. Three to four days prior to an event, we usually know that we're going to start sending troops out. So, it's a much shorter duration, a little less time to prepare, but you are still getting your affairs in order in those few days so that your family can handle, uh, you being gone during that emergency situation. It's extremely rewarding to complete both the state and federal mission. I think the National Guard is better overall because of that dual mission than an active duty, uh, career. It's just, it's different; a lot of reasons why, but, uh, the fulfillment that I receive from being a national Guardsman is why I do what I do today still.

Kirsten: Awesome, thanks for sharing that. So, let's talk a little bit more about the benefits. Work-life balance is something that people really value nowadays, um, so let's talk about the work-life balance of soldiers and airmen. I know you are only one person...

[Laughs]

...but can you give me an idea of what that is like for a soldier or airman, and does that change during times of emergency?

Col. Almond: I think work-life balance varies by person as well as experience. Now, having 29 years in the service, married almost 25...

Kirsten: Congratulations!

Col. Almond: Thank you. I've gone through a lot of experiences over these, you know, the last 30 years of my kind of professional career post college. Whereas new soldiers and airmen that are coming into the Guard right now are learning that work-life balance. So, we just had Tropical Storm Helene, and we spent, you know, over 50 days supporting the citizens of North Carolina during that disaster. That's not normal, but we had soldiers and airmen that were there the entire time. When

they showed up on the ground, they committed to being there for the entire duration of the mission because they loved what they did. And they had to adjust their work-life balance based off of that commitment.

As I mentioned, uh, the typical mobilization within the state for an emergency is about seven to ten days, and so you go through peaks and valleys when—throughout the work-life balance. We drill one weekend a month, two weeks out of the year. That's the recruiting. I don't know that I've ever done that in my 29 years, uh, but one weekend a month, two weeks out of the year is your commitment to the Guard. That's your statutory requirement. You can plan for that, but when you have to go to an additional school or you have a—a training event that comes up, you get a mobilization call, there's additional training associated with that. You do increase your—your requirement from a—a weekend perspective or your traditional Guardsman perspective, and it does take coordination with your family to ensure the communication, uh, between your family and your employers are allowing you to conduct the missions, uh, and they get the support. You know, just a quick “thank you” to any employers that would hear this because National Guardsmen can't do their job without support from the employers. National Guardsmen can't do their job without the support from their families. So, yes, it is extremely difficult to manage that work-life balance, but as you gain experience within the Guard, it becomes a lot easier to support the work-life balance between the family and with your organization.

Kirsten:

Thank you for your transparency and that answer. And I think it really just comes down to everyone h-has different seasons of life, and you can only prepare so much, but as you grow in your career, I think no matter what your profession is, it's a little bit easier to find that balance. So, this is the part of every episode that I like to get a little bit personal, asking people for their success stories, a job well done or a—or a challenge that was overcome. So, if possible, can you share a story or two about an experience where you thought people went above and beyond, um, or just something that you may not have

been able to experience had you not been part of the North Carolina National Guard?

Col. Almond:

This is a great, great question, and everybody likes talking about the positives, so I—I love the opportunity to—to tell the story of the Guard, you know, from the personal experience. My kids might not like it because they hear it all the time, but in this—this venue, I know that we'll be able to—to just roll with this. So, back in 2019, I participated in a state partnership program event with Upward Minuteman which was a—a large exercise in Botswana. And we had about 400 Army and Air National Guardsmen there. Uh, we had the—the 440th band was with us and supporting the Botswana Defense Force, uh, in Botswana. We completed various engineer projects, musical concerts, strategic planning, and then the equipment that we took was actually flown in by one of our C-17s, uh, with the North Carolina tail. So, it was extremely exciting to participate in that. I never would have been able to do that without being a member of the Guard.

Continuing with, uh, you know, kind of the theme of the state partnership program, back in 2023 I was the deputy exercise director for Fire Shield. Fire Shield is a 13-year exercise with the Moldovan Army. It focuses typically on a Moldovan field artillery battalion, and again, I am a field artillery officer, so being able to go and support that for the first time was extremely exciting. During this exercise, for the very first time, we incorporated a maneuver force and infantry company into the exercise. It was an absolutely amazing experience to see how Moldova worked together to integrate, uh, both their maneuver and their fires aspect from, uh, uh, this mission. They increased their readiness training. It was the largest Fire Shield exercise that they have completed so far to date. In fact, I am going towards the end of this month back to Moldova to plan the Fire Shield for '25, uh, which will be held in August of this year. As well as Moldova has decided to incorporate it into a larger event in 2026 where they are going to bring back the maneuver, and we'll have probably close to 2,000 people participating in the exercise.

More recently here in 2025, during the Emergency Management Symposium and North Carolina National Guard Senior League Workshop, I was able to bring together all four of our partners. We've had Moldova and Botswana, uh, long-standing partners with the North Carolina National Guard, and in late 2023 we were awarded Malawi and Zambia as partners, as well. So, we now have four state partners. So, we brought all four of the countries here to the state, and we were able to discuss lessons learned from Hurricane Helene. We discussed the f-issues affecting their countries, as well, such as migration of a large number of people in Moldova, polluted lakes destroying large supplies of fish and wildlife in Zambia, massive flooding in Botswana and typhoons and flooding in Malawi. The ability to watch the leaders that came from each country as well as senior leaders from North Carolina National Guard, North Carolina Department of Agriculture, North Carolina Department of Public Safety discuss these shared resources and how they tackle each of the problems, I never would have been able to experience without being in the Guard.

And we've talked a lot about our role on—in emergency management and state active duty for the North Carolina National Guard, and it gets very emotional when you see the citizens of your—your state in trouble. But the fulfillment of being in our Joint Operations Center when we send a helicopter to go pick somebody up off their roof, or you're sending a truck through flooded waters to pick somebody up from their house, it—it's just extremely rewarding to be able to be a part of that. I wouldn't be able to do that without being in the North Carolina National Guard.

From my federal mission, um, let's go back to my first appointment in 2004. Where we stayed was right across the street from a brick factory. So, imagine about 35, um, smokestacks with black smoke coming out. We didn't know a whole lot about what was going on over there other than bricks were being made. As part of my role, I had to go out and meet with those local leaders to just kind of find out a little bit about what's going on, plus we wanted to make sure they weren't going to attack us. And it was really humbling to see the

workers of this brick factory. They were school-aged children, and we wanted them to be in school. We did have a project going on that was building a school at the entrance to the brick factory, so we doubled our efforts to help get the contractors moving forward, and we decided that we were going to conduct a medical clinic just prior to the opening of the school. And for security reasons, we didn't inform the local leaders that we were doing that until about 9:00 the night prior to conducting it. We showed up about 6:00 in the morning, so about nine hours later, to secure the area, and the kids were already lined up out the door. I—I didn't even know there were that many kids there. And they knew they were going to get shots, they knew they might have teeth cleaned or pulled or something, but they were standing there happy at 6:00 in the morning. We got started, and those kids, you could hear them getting the shot, crying. They walked out with a toy or a soccer ball, and I'll just never forget the—the faces of those kids just being ecstatic and happy, uh, for us conducting that medical clinic, and then starting them, um, like two days later, starting school. So, that was just extremely rewarding. So then now, those kids are young adults, and I hope that they have, you know, are better off today than what they potentially could have been if we hadn't completed that school and done that medical clinic.

Kirsten:

What a wonderful story! Thank you for sharing that. I really think it speaks to not only building communities within the state but internationally, as well. So, these partnerships you spoke of, especially the international ones, how do you see the mutual benefits of these four international partnerships?

Col. Almond:

The state partnership program is an extremely rewarding program. We conduct security cooperation engagements with each of the countries, roughly about 50 to 60 engagements a year with our four countries. We're actually planning for over 100 next year. But having the interest from the countries to conduct a security cooperation engagement shows the level of trust that they have with the United States of America and the North Carolina National Guard to become better with and share experiences because that's what we're doing. We're

sharing experiences. We tell them things of how we accomplish something. They share that same experience with us on how they accomplished it, and we both learn from each other. It is mutually beneficial for—for both—for all four countries as well as the North Carolina National Guard.

When, uh, personnel from Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Moldova come here and I pick them up from the airport, some of the first questions are, “I want to know how you maintain your sweet potatoes.” I go, “Well, I'm not an expert in that, but I know who to call.” Or they go, “I want to know how you do irrigation within a greenhouse.” And I go, “I'm not an expert in that, but I know who to call.” But it's sharing that experience, both sides, because somebody from the Department of Agriculture or NC State Cooperative Agreement will answer that question for them, and then they'll share their experience. They create a relationship, and all the countries get better, the state as well. The state partnership program is a mutual benefiting organization event for all our four countries, as well as the North Carolina National Guard.

Kirsten: Well, we are at the end of our questions. I want to give you the chance, uh, if you have any, um, for any closing statements, but I did just want to thank you for coming down and talking with me and, um, just sharing your experience for the last 29 years.

Col. Almond: I greatly appreciate the opportunity. I'd be remiss if I—if I didn't say “thank you” to my family for supporting me over these years. I joined the Guard before I was married, so my wife married into the Guard. Our kids were born after I was in the Guard, so they...this is all they've known. I've been away for countless birthdays, anniversaries, dance recitals, music recitals, so I, you know, just a quick “thank you” to—to the family, uh, for—for all the support that they've given me. I thank you for the opportunity to—to allow me to share a little bit about the Guard...

[Music begins softly]

...because it's important for us to understand everything that we do or what the Guard does for—for public safety, so it's a—it's a great opportunity there. I appreciate the opportunity.

Conclusion

[Music]

Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through preparation, prevention and protection with integrity and honor. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, X and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. Special thanks to the North Carolina National Guard Public Information Office for assistance with this episode. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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