

Accomplished National Guard MEDEVAC unit returns from Afghanistan

By Sgt. Aaron Gott, 166th Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Oct. 15, 2009

FORT LEWIS, WASH – Nearly a year ago, Charlie/1-168th Air Ambulance Company began their mobilization training under supervision of the 166th Aviation Brigade. Early this month, they returned from their deployment to Afghanistan and are completing their demobilization processing at Fort Lewis, Wash.

C/1-168th was trained at the Fort Sill, Okla. Mobilization Training Center from October to December last year in preparation for its deployment to Afghanistan, where it was charged with providing patient transfer, point-of-injury pick-up and hoist extraction services throughout the country.

The 2-291st Aviation Battalion was responsible for teaching, coaching and mentoring the unit and worked closely with the unit commander to ensure training requirements and goals were met before the deployment began. 2-291st is part of the Fort Hood-based 166th Aviation Brigade, the only organization responsible for the training of Reserve and National Guard aviation units, which constitute nearly half of the Army aviation force.

“We did our best to replicate the theater environment and provide realistic, relevant training scenarios,” said Lt. Col. Tom Jessee, commander of the 2-291st Avn. Bn. Events included training in hoist extraction, downed aircraft personnel recovery lanes, simulated aviation training exercises and a mission rehearsal exercise designed to put the commander and staff into a realistic, combat mission-oriented scenario.

Jessee and his crew prepared the unit for the worst with a simulated mass-casualty scenario in the aftermath of a suicide bomb detonation inside a busy dining facility.

“C/1-168th made our job easy because they were motivated and ready to train,” said Sgt. First Class Joseph Von Holtz, lead unit mobilization liaison for the 2-291st Avn. Bn.

The 166th Aviation Brigade also acts as a liaison between deploying units and the training authorities at First Army and the Aviation Center at Fort Rucker, Ala., according to Maj. Dan Anderson, commander of C/1168th. “It played a pivotal role in the approval of a modified mobilization training timeline, efficiently tailored to my assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, resulting in the shortest post-mobilization aviation timeline to date,” he said.

During its deployment, the company flew over 5000 flight hours in 15 aircraft, resulting in the successful completion of 2200 medical evacuation missions which transported over 3400 patients over a ten-month period. Anderson said he is “absolutely confident dozens of Soldiers are alive today due to the high level of care the Soldiers of this company provided.”

Anderson attributed much of his unit's success to one of the Reserve Component's unique wartime contributions – civilian experience. He said the company drew from a base of medics with careers as EMS paramedics before activation for deployment.

Jessee added the unit was well-suited to their mission because of their stateside geographic location. "Because of their training and state emergency experience in the high-altitude, mountainous terrain of Wyoming, Nevada and even some of northern California, the unit was more prepared than even most active duty aviation units," he said.

Jessee and Von Holtz traveled to Fort Lewis to welcome the unit home, conduct an After Action Review and recruit the returning aviators for a year-long tour with 2-291st at Fort Hood as part of the Operation Warrior Trainer program.

"These veteran aviators have a wealth of extremely valuable, fresh experience to pass along to the next rotation of deploying units" said Jessee.

Charlie Company is headquartered in Sacramento, Calif. with a detachment of six aircraft located in Reno, Nev. The company was also augmented by three additional crews and airframes from another guard unit in Cheyenne, Wyo.

Attached photos:

0145: Sgt. 1st Class Joseph Von Holtz welcomes a C/1-168th Air Ambulance Co. Soldier back from Afghanistan during their redeployment ceremony at Fort Lewis, Wash. on Oct. 9. Von Holtz worked closely with the unit before its deployment.

0140-1: Lt. Col. Tom Jessee greets deplaning C/1-168th Air Ambulance Co. Soldiers during the company's homecoming ceremony after their 10-month deployment to Afghanistan. Jessee oversaw the unit's pre-deployment training at Fort Sill, Okla.

0148: Cpt. Tyler Smentek, executive officer for C/1-168th, discusses his deployment with the 2-291st Avn. Bn. Soldiers who prepared his unit for the deployment.