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Operation Boss Lift: ESGR program builds bonds between employers, citizen-soldier employees

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By Gary Massaro



Helicopter pilots launched low-explosive rockets at targets during training at Fort Rucker.

We crashed on the helicopter's takeoff.

Then we crashed on landing.

And we walked away to talk about it.

That wasn't hard to do, really, the walking away. All we did was get out of our seats and walk single-file in an aisle and out the back and onto a catwalk outside the flight simulator.

The simulators save taxpayers a lot of money – and lives – because the screen flashes red to signify that someone messed up.



Operation Boss Lift tourists were impressed with all the gadgets inside a Black Hawk helicopter. Photos by Gary Massaro.

That someone both times happened to be Dwight Hill, one of the members of Operation Boss Lift, a program hosted by [Employers Support of the Guard and Reserve](#) – ESGR for short.

ESGR takes business types on quick-hit trips to places like [Fort Rucker, Ala.](#), to show employers what their employees are doing when called up.

A little more than 13,000 Coloradans serve in the Guard and Reserves. About 2,000 are on active duty. There are 102 ESGR volunteers in Colorado.



A sleeping bag and liner on the wall fit in the square container held by Sergeant 1st Class Waron Williams, part of a survival kit for downed pilots.

Fort Rucker is near Dothan, Ala., a town of 75,000. Agriculture is a big industry, peanuts, mostly, but also field corn and pecans. Cotton is also a major crop.

Fort Rucker is a boost to the economy, which took a hit when Sony Corp. announced it was pulling out, according to the Boss Lift bus driver.

Pine and cypress and palm grow alongside roads and highways.

The trip is designed to disabuse bosses and colleagues from asking, “How was your vacation?” or “How was your long weekend?” when members of the Guards and Reserve are away, working hard, learning necessary skills they bring back and work on some more closer to home – like the helicopter training.



Colorado native Maggie Ramos, a helicopter pilot instructor, outside the privately run simulator program.

In fairness to Hill, a former commander with the Boulder County Sheriff’s Office, it was his first time at the controls – no prior instruction, no hints. So when he took off and the screen flashed red, he asked, “What happened?”

Instructor Maggie Ramos told him that he pulled too hard on one of the levers.

Ramos reset the machine and we took off again, more smoothly. And Hill took eight of us on a trip.

Ramos hit a switch and it was nighttime. A heliport beacon blinked on the horizon.

“Incoming,” one wiseacre shouted.



Gerald O’Nan had forward-facing seat aboard the C26E Fairchild, which ferried members to and from Fort Rucker, Ala.

“That’s a beacon, you fool,” someone corrected.

Then, just before we touched down, he eased too heavy on a pedal and caught a skid. The screen flashed red a second time to signify we crashed and burned.

The “flights” are recorded for the real pilots – just in case hotshots try to tap-dance and say they didn’t really make a mistake.

It catches their attention real quick when they see the replays, said Ramos, a Colorado native and veteran who now works for a private company that built, maintains and runs the simulator center.

The simulator was just one activity packed into a three-day commando trip – visits and lectures from officers, a tour of a village filled with insurgents, the fix-it guys who repair equipment, and time on the indoor rifle range with real weapons and laser ammunition.

The trip is part of an ongoing effort of ESGR volunteers to educate employers about the law and how the organization can help them.

Often, problems arise because of ignorance of federal law. ESGR representatives called it miscommunication, said Aaron Lochner, the volunteer ombudsman. So volunteers often visit employers and explain what they must do and how provisions in the federal law can also help them. For example: An employee on the company insurance plan is called up to active duty. Taxpayers pay for the worker’s health insurance during the call-up. And employers can get a break on premiums by sliding its portion of the cost from the private plan to the public one.

The trip started out of Centennial Airport aboard a small cargo plane outfitted to carry passengers – not comfortably.

Aboard the plane were Joel Kern, a Colorado Springs police officer; Mark Graf of Gonzales Consulting Services; Gerald O’Nan, a lawyer with the U.S. Department of Interior; Dwight Hill, a Boulder County Sheriff’s Office commander; Chuck Winter, HIS Global Inc. vice president; Dr. Barbara Jenkins of Advanced Audiology Inc.; James Giesen of Citywide Banks; William Rezak of Custom Instrumentation Services Corp.; and Chuck Trautman of Advantage Security Inc.

The tour guide was Kathleen Dorram of ESGR.

At various stops on post, the group learned a bit about the training.

In one, fake smoke billowed from a wooden shed. Goats were bleating. Music blared – all from loudspeakers.

Then the blast of an air-compressor machine gun added to the racket.

For soldiers training for Iraq or Afghanistan, it was real enough.

As Boss Lift tourists walked through the waferboard and two-by-four village, enemy combatants – made of foam, jumped up from home-made spring launchers – built on base and far less costly than store-bought simulated fighters.

Soldiers are equipped with laser weapons or paint balls – saves on the cost of buying live ammunition. And their actions and reactions are recorded on a computer to replay and study later.

Before all that, soldiers get to enter the “glass house,” a roofless structure that simulates a building. On top, a catwalk surrounds the thing, where instructors can watch soldiers storm and search a room. Later, the instructors will go over what went right, what went wrong and what could have been done better.

Fort Rucker also is home to the unmanned aircraft systems – think drones, but don’t necessarily think of pilotless, airplane sized craft.

Some are as big as a kid’s glider and can be launched by hand.

Others, much bigger, can be shot aloft from a sharp-angled launcher.

The controls are a lot like video games young people play. For that matter, so are some of the controls aboard the helicopter.

The drones aren’t merely kill weapons equipped with rockets. The smaller ones are the soldiers’ eyes from above, sent aloft to scout for ambushes and other deadly things.

The Army, Col. Chris Carlisle pointed out, flies most of the unmanned craft – roughly 10:1 over the Air Force.

He talked with the Boss Lift folks at dinner their first night in town.

“Why design a system where the human is the weakest link?” he said.

The drones are simple to launch and monitor.

“Unless you override, it will return on its own,” Carlisle said.

Even though the official name is unmanned aircraft, “there’s nothing unmanned about it,” Carlisle said. “There are lots of people involved.”

Carlisle called the Unmanned Aircraft System “the eyes of the Army.”

“UAS gives the combat community the ability to determine the right tool in the toolbox,” he said.

Drones with their video-game type controls aren’t the only modern technology in the field.

Cell phones are an integral part of the soldiers' materiel.

"We don't talk anymore. We text," Carlisle said. "We can text faster than we can talk."

It's also a lot quieter.

Stealth is making its way into more tools as well.

For instance, downed helicopter pilots can use a laser beam to attract rescuers. There's also a light-stick invisible to the naked eye, visible with night-vision goggles, to signal rescuers.

The cockpits are loaded with high-tech stuff.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jeff Woodham is one of the instructors who trains helicopter pilots.

He practically gushed when describing the newest version of the Black Hawk, the UH-60M.

"It's button-licious," he said. "There are buttons everywhere."

Over at one hangar, civilian mechanics were working on various helicopters. The Boss Lift group sat in one. There are seats that fold down to carry soldiers to battle, or fold up to make room for cargo or stretchers.

Changes are constantly made to upgrade the helicopters.

"The most dangerous part of my job is driving to work," Woodham said.

Those changes and the training that comes with them are rigorous, as illustrated by Lt. Col. Mike Burns.

"You're not going to be a Black Hawk pilot if I won't put my son in back," Burns said. "If I won't put my son in back, why would I put yours?"

The chopper pilots from the Guard and Reserve get intense training at Fort Rucker. But it doesn't end there. They must return to their homes and then train some more at facilities nearby "after they've finished their regular jobs," said Capt. Rod Duplin.

CWO3 Ricardo Luna was pilot aboard a chopper shot down in Afghanistan in 2007 and is now an instructor at Fort Rucker.

Luna said he learned the hard way that when a chopper flips, the internal controls turn with the rotor. So he got beat up bad by the joystick and everything else inside.

He was rescued. He came to, lying naked under a sheet and surrounded by medical personnel at a field hospital.

“A nurse was washing my face,” Luna said. “I told her, ‘Usually by this time, I know your name.’ She said, ‘He’s going to make it.’ ”

Luna was a supply sergeant before becoming a chief warrant officer. He likes the new rank.

“As a non-commissioned officer, you never get paid as good as you should,” he said.

The simulated rifle range isn’t the only cost cutback for training. Helicopter pilots training to shoot rockets and machine guns didn’t use real ammo. The rockets were equipped with a lower-level explosive charge. The exercise was designed to get pilots to shoot the missiles at the right place.

Still, the choppers flew relatively low, relatively fast and launched – just like July Fourth, only in daylight.

While helicopter pilots train up high, the infantry trains down low.

One of the biggest treats for many on Boss Lift was a stint on the rifle range, inside with laser weapons that were fired at a giant screen.

After initial instructions, the Boss Lift tried out the weapons.

The screen is computerized. And a playback shows where each round hit – more missed for the most part.

After Round 1, instructor Sean Sparks noted the entire gang, shooting everything from a grenade launcher to a rifle, hit around 10 percent of the insurgents.

“You guys scared a lot of people,” Sparks said.

Boss Lift crews were universally impressed with the excursion. They chattered away on the plane ride home, talking about one highlight that led the conversation to another and yet another.

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