

Specialized Springfield Based National Guard Team Returns from Afghanistan

Written by National Guard PAO Illinois
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BLOOMINGTON, IL (05/01/2012)(readMedia)-- Approximately 20 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers who served in Afghanistan as part of an embedded training team have completed their mission and will return to Illinois this week. The homecoming ceremony for Bilateral Embedded Staff Team (BEST) A8 will be May 2 at the Bloomington National Guard Armory, 1616 S. Main St. in Bloomington at 4:30 p.m.

Mobilized in June, the team trained at Camp Atterbury, Ind., and joined its Polish counterparts in Poland for training before deploying to Afghanistan.

BEST A8, who was part of Task Force White Eagle, was instrumental in preparing the southern half of Ghazni Province for the 82nd Airborne's arrival.

"The amount of time, coordination and physical labor put into this mission is impressive by itself, but the fact that the Army and Air Force engineers completed this mission is incredible," said 1st Lt. Ryan Bivins of Dixon with BEST A8.

The operation consisted of more than 500 Army, Navy and Air Force engineers, expanding five existing bases and building five new bases during the harsh winter months of Afghanistan.

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"A logistics operation of this significance was only possible through cooperation of the Soldiers, Airmen, transporters and aviators, Department of Defense agencies and the Polish military contingent," said Maj. Rhonda Petersen of Lindenhurst with BEST A8. "Task Force White Eagle was able to realize this objective through coordination and execution with more than nine task forces within Regional Command East and 1st Cavalry Division. The proactive dynamic of all involved ensured a winning combination."

Attack helicopters were not something Task Force White Eagle had received too much of in the past until Capt. Tony Keel of Grayslake ensured Soldiers in Task Force White Eagle had support from the sky.

"Helicopter planning was extremely time consuming, but very rewarding and I really enjoyed my job," Keel said. "I especially enjoyed planning with Kiowa and Apache attack helicopter crews because all the ground units loved having that air power overhead supporting their missions and that motivated me to obtain as much air support as possible." The Illinois National Guard has co-deployed with every Polish rotation to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003. Col. Tom Purple of Rochester said leadership and experience were evident in the success of their team.

"It is a true honor to serve with outstanding warriors during a critical time in the campaign and be part of the success and history of our great Army," Purple said.

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