COVER STORY

Attack on America:
6 Terrorists wreak havoc, Army Reserve responds
10 Personal accounts: A will to live
11 Personal accounts: Reserve MP takes action
12 Mortuary Affairs: 311th on duty at Pentagon
14 Coping with trauma
14 IRS sets up special toll free number for families
15 VA benefits for survivors
16 A look back in pictures

FEATURES

23 159th Aviation Regiment plays major role in rescue mission
24 Army Reserve led African Crisis Response Initiative ends
25 AR-PERSCOM web site wins first place
26 Med Falcon IV: Reservists provide ‘maximum care’ in Kosovo
28 A long and winding road: A Reserve unit’s deployment saga
30 A mission within a mission: Postal company delivers more than mail
31 Medical unit provides support in Nicaragua
32 Life in the fast lane: Reservists leap with Golden Knights
33 Boat unit sails to preserve pirate history

CORRECTION: The Summer 2001 Edition, Page 18 was missing information in the last sentence of the “VA” story. It should have read as follows: “Anyone interested in the Center for Veterans Enterprise can contact the website at http://www.vetbiz.gov/ or call toll free 1-866-584-2344 or (202) 565-8336.”

Cover: Photos taken after a high-jacked commercial jetliner crashed into the Pentagon on Sept 11, 2001. The terrorist attack caused extensive damage to the Pentagon and followed similar attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Both incidents resulted in the loss of thousands of lives.
39 Vet teams provide service in remote area
40 MOUT training takes MPs to new level of readiness
45 MPs hone enemy POW interment skills
44 412th Engineers take training abroad, perform METL in Europe
46 Golden Thunder: Active, Reserve, NG unite for joint exercise

48 Craig Morgan: From country boy to soldier boy in one leap
50 New ROTC brigade family affair
51 All in the family: Son enlists mom and wife

52 84th Div. (IT) soldier named Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year
53 Army Reserve Drill Sergeants take top honors
54 Reserve “shooters” win big in national, international competitions
55 DLA Reservist of the Year named
56 88th RSC soldiers go for the “GAFET” gold

4 Working on the railroad
34 From the CAR
5 From the CSM
18 News Updates
58 Snapshots

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By Lt. Col. Randy Pullen

They are on a mission of national importance, doing what must be done. It is a job most others would prefer not to do.

They are the men and women of the Army Reserve’s 311th Quartermaster Company (Mortuary Affairs) from Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. Their mission is to sift through the rubble from the terrorist attack on the Pentagon, looking for remains of the victims of that attack.

Their mission is a grim one. When American Airlines Flight 77 smashed into the west side of the Pentagon on September 11, it carried some 10,000 gallons of jet fuel. The resulting explosion, fire and collapse of part of the building killed 124 people inside the Pentagon and 64 on the airliner. The condition of the bodies, buried under and mixed among tons of debris, is best not to be described. To do what needed to be done to recover the remains — quickly, efficiently, with dignity and honor — would take a special sort of professional: the mortuary affairs specialist.

The mortuary affairs soldiers of the active Army’s 54th Quartermaster Company from Fort Lee, Va., were on site by September 12. It quickly became clear that the mission to recover the remains from the Pentagon would take more of the highly trained specialists than the 54th had.

At about 10:30 a.m. on September 14, the call went out to the Army Reserve’s 65th Regional Support Command in Puerto Rico, the higher headquarters of the 311th QM Company.

Although President George W. Bush ordered a partial mobilization of the Reserves this same day, it was not in effect when the call came, nor would the first call-ups from it take place for a few days. Help was needed now, volunteers who would deploy in a training status for an anything-but-training type mission.

The first 85 soldiers of the 311th left Puerto Rico later that day. By the next day, Saturday, September 15, they were getting settled at Fort Myer, Va. By Monday, September 17, they were at work in the north parking lot of the Pentagon, working side-by-side with the FBI. After FBI agents searched the debris for evidence, the 311th soldiers went to work recovering remains and personnel effects and preparing them for shipment to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for identification.

Another 105 soldiers from Puerto Rico — the rest of the 311th and augmentees from the 246th Quartermaster Company — arrived on September 26. They were called up under the partial mobilization. The status for the original 85 volunteers had also changed from active duty for training to partial mobilization call-up by this time, too.
For some of the 311th’s soldiers, Friday the 14th was their first drill with the unit since graduating from Advanced Individual Training at Fort Lee, Va., a few weeks earlier. Keeping a close eye on them as they perform this difficult mission was a strong core of experienced leaders. Several of their NCOs were with the company when it deployed to the Persian Gulf and know first-hand the sort of work they are required to perform in the area next to the Pentagon.

One of the Gulf War vets is 1st Sgt. Jose Santiago. In his civilian job, he restores classic cars. He deployed with the company as a sergeant during Operation DESERT STORM and supported the 1st Armored Division. He wears the “Old Ironsides” combat patch on his right shoulder.

“This is different than in the desert,” Santiago said. “There, bodies would be brought back to a forward collection point where we’d process the remains. Here, we’re going through the rubble to find remains.”

He said he saw “really nasty stuff” during the Gulf War but for the young soldiers in the company, this was going to be a big and difficult experience for them.

“I’ve got really good NCOs,” Santiago said. “Seven of them — six men and one woman — were with the company in the desert.”

They and the other NCOs keep close watch on their soldiers, both on site and off.

Santiago said it was important to not let individual soldiers go off in a corner or isolate themselves from the others after they come off a shift at the site. They need to be kept informed of what is going on, they need to keep their minds busy, to go to the bowling alley or to engage in some physical training. He spoke from experience. He and his other NCOs are determined to make sure his soldiers benefit from that experience.

One of the youngest soldiers is Pvt. 2 Wilnette Perez-Padilla. She finished AIT at Fort Lee on August 28. Her first drill with the unit was on September 14.

“They asked for volunteers,” she said. “My hand went up.”

“It’s a sad situation,” she added, “but I’m extremely proud to be here to help our nation.”

Her first day of operations at the Pentagon on September 17 started out by someone thanking her for what she was doing. That someone was the President of the United States.

Perez-Padilla was on hand, along with several other members of the 311th, when President Bush came by the Pentagon to meet with the reserve component chiefs. They got to shake his hand when he left that meeting. When told that the 311th was an Army Reserve company from Puerto Rico, the President exchanged a few words in Spanish with the company commander, 1st Lt. Hector Martinez.

After meeting the President, the 311th soldiers also visited with Lt. Gen. Thomas J. Plewes, Chief, Army Reserve. Then it was back to the north parking lot.

Soon, Perez-Padilla and her comrades were in biohazard suits and searching through tons of wreckage. The first day, working in 12-hour shifts, the 311th went through 14 truck trailers full of debris. The remains they found were collected and bagged, for shipment to Dover AFB. Once the remains are identified, they can help bring some closure to the loved ones of the victims.