

Oregon Army National Guard NCOs Stay Busy Stateside

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The beautiful sights of Oregon's mountains and waterfalls can end up being dangerous to those unprepared. That danger is what keeps Soldiers from the Oregon Army National Guard busy.

Staff Sgt. Benjamin Sjullie is a platoon sergeant and flight medic with the Oregon Army National Guard. He said the Pacific Northwest state's terrain, along with the cooperation of other state and local agencies, means National Guard flight crews in Oregon get more training and missions than they might in other states.

“In Oregon, we’re blessed with these mountains and we’re blessed with very active people who love to hike, love to ski, love to push the limits,” Sjullie said. “Mount Hood is probably our bread and butter when it comes to our missions. The thing about Hood is it’s just tall enough to make it exciting, but it’s also tall enough to get yourself into danger if you don’t know what you are doing. ... It’s really forced us to stay on top of our game in hoisting and search and rescue. A lot of other states’ National Guard units don’t have that.”

Sjullie said Oregon Army National Guard leaders reached out to state agencies to let them know what the National Guard could do, and now Soldiers are called on quite often.

“We get a lot of support from the state,” he said. “They really have our backs. The sheriffs and the search and rescue companies around the state, they know the procedure on getting a Black Hawk in the air. They know what type of missions we do. So, they’re really proactive on getting a Black Hawk in the air when they need it.”

Flight crew

Getting a Black Hawk flight crew ready for missions can be difficult, Sjullie said. All National Guard Soldiers have civilian jobs they have to keep up with, but being part of a flight crew requires many extra hours.

“That’s the thing about our unit,” Sjullie said. “When we go through the interview process for new crew members and new flight medics or crew chiefs, one of the things we really voice to them is that this is not a typical M-day (man-day) job because we have flight requirements we have to keep up with. We have hours we have to keep up with, daytime and nighttime training. We have our hoist training, which is very extensive.”

Oregon’s missions require skills and training that many active-duty units never receive, said Maj. Nathan Edgecomb, operations officer of the Army Aviation Support Facility in Salem, Oregon.

“A lot of active, they are very restrictive on what they can do, so they might only do a 50-foot hoist,” Edgecomb said. “We won’t even sign off our crew

chiefs and medics until they've done a 250-foot hoist under night-vision goggles and in the daytime. We do a lot more of that kind of training."


Lessons learned

Sjullie said the main lessons new crew members learn involve working with a crew while traveling by helicopter.

"Attention to detail is the big thing," Sjullie said. "They go through a lot of academic training before they really start flying. Once you get the academic training, you start thinking — and I still remember going through my progression back in 2003 — 'Oh, yeah. This is simple. I got this.' Then you get out there, and the helicopter turns on, the rotor starts turning and all communication is hand and arm signals and over our inner communication system, and so just learning how to operate around the aircraft with all the noise and all the moving parts, remembering where to walk and when not to walk, when to talk, when not to talk — just starting off, it's difficult. Once you progress so far, then you throw in the hoist training and the mission training, and you can get overwhelmed pretty quickly. But we stay on top of it, and more than 90 percent of the people who we bring in do a really good job.

"That's because of our interview process," Sjullie said. "On the paramedic side, we run the medics through medical scenarios prior to getting them into the unit, just to make sure. You really don't want to be a mediocre medic coming into the unit because we're not here to teach medicine. We're here to teach paramedics how to be good flight medics. Because you're not just a medic, you're a crew member. The Army motto as a medic is you fight first, then you tend to your medicine."





In his civilian career, Sjullie is a paramedic, and the mindset of fighting first as a National Guard flight medic is just one of the differences Sjullie has to adjust to when he gets on a Black Hawk.

“Being a medic on the civilian side I realize that when I’m working on patients I’m in a pretty safe environment, and I have got five or six other paramedics around me,” Sjullie said “But on a typical mission, either downrange or stateside, most likely it’s just you. And you have three extra crew members who don’t know paramedicine, so you’re not only trying to take care of yourself, keep yourself safe, you’re also trying to do your paramedic job.

“For an example, when we do high-altitude missions here — like on Mount Hood or Mount Jefferson or the Three Sisters mountains — I’ve been on missions where I have to anchor into the side of the mountain before I get off the hoist because it’s so steep,” he said. “So I have to take care of myself before I can take care of somebody else. You’re constantly trying to take care of two people at one time, whereas, on the civilian side you have that safety net where you’re not going to fall off the side of a mountain. You’re on a street or in somebody’s house. So it doesn’t just take being a good medic here. It takes having a good head on your shoulders, being smart, being able to break up a mission so you don’t get tunnel vision on just one thing. We have some pretty dangerous missions here where if you’re not paying attention, one wrong move and it could be you who is needing to be rescued.”

Firefighting mission

In addition to hoisting injured people off mountains and getting them medical care, the National Guard Black Hawk crews in Oregon also help the state’s firefighting efforts.

Sgt. Steven Armstrong, Black Hawk crew chief and mechanic for the Oregon National Guard, said his job as crew chief involves daily inspections to make sure the helicopter is ready to fly, replacing components as needed, then controlling the hoist on missions.

“Our biggest flight duty is we’re the hoist operators,” Armstrong said. “We’re the ones controlling the hoist, dropping the medic down. We help with other tasks in the aircraft, like fuel management and air space surveillance.

“But then we also do water bucket stuff for wildfires here stateside, which is a really fun mission for us,” Armstrong said. “They train all the crew chiefs to press the button to open the bucket. That’s basically what we do. But we also talk the pilots in to where they need to drop the water. So, we have guys on the ground who are doing the real work on the wildfire, digging lines to contain the fire, and then they’re telling us where they want us to drop the water. Because the pilots in these aircraft—it’s not our full-time job to work fires—they don’t have bubble windows so they can see. So we have to be their eyes, basically, and try to talk them in to where they need to drop the water.”

Armstrong has been so inspired by what he has seen while being part of a Black Hawk crew that he just finished getting a paramedic degree so that he can be more involved in the life-saving portion of the mission.

“I went on a mission a couple of years ago with Staff Sgt. Sjullie, and it made me want to go the paramedic route, so I’ve been going to school for two years,” Armstrong said. “I just got my degree as a paramedic. So, I’ll be switching from the crew chief to the flight medic side.”

Transitions

Life in the National Guard is full of transitions. Before you can get too settled in your civilian life, you get sent on a long deployment. Upon your return, you try to settle back into the civilian routine. But most employers do their best to ease the transition, Sjullie said. He works as a firefighter/paramedic for the city of Eugene, Oregon.

“Luckily, most employers are really good about it,” Sjullie said. “There are not a lot that I’ve heard of that give the Soldier a hard time. Once we get word that we’ll be deploying, I try to let my employer know as soon as possible. On my last deployment, I was able to let them know about a year out. They prepare for it.

“It’s a tough transition,” he said. “After my last deployment, it took me a few months to get back into the groove because you go from a combat environment to a civilian environment. It can be tough. But if you have a good employer, they really make it easy for you.”

In addition to having developed a good working relationship with state and local agencies, the Oregon National Guard offers opportunities for joint training and missions, as well, Sjullie said.

“We have a really good working relationship with the Navy and Marines,” he said. “I got to fly with the Coast Guard a few years ago and train with them. That was a really good experience because they do a lot of water rescues, obviously. They like to do hoist missions 50 feet or lower. They hate the heights. I hate the water, so it works out. Their eyes got really big when I told them we do 300-foot hoists. We bumped a lot of our training off each other, and we learned a lot from it. I learned a lot from them on some hoist-training techniques, and they learned a lot about doing higher-altitude training.”

What NCOs bring

When it comes to Black Hawk medic missions, NCOs are really what the mission is all about, Edgecomb said.

“On a Medevac, I’m an officer and a pilot, but I’m a really just a chauffeur,” Edgecomb said. “My job is to get the medic and the crew chief wherever they need to go, so they can hoist somebody down, pick up the wounded and start working on them. Without them, I wouldn’t have a job. They are the ones who save the lives. We’re just taxi drivers.”

Sjullie takes his job as an NCO seriously and is as professional as they come, Edgecomb said.

“He is a great NCO because he is a true leader,” Edgecomb said. “The guy, you give him a task and he will find the necessary resources and he’ll get it done. He doesn’t give you a bunch of lip, and you don’t have to go through a bunch of ‘This is why we need to do it.’ He just says, ‘Yes, sir,’ and goes and does it. You don’t have to hold his hand or give him a bunch of guidance. He just gets it done.”

Both Sjullie and Armstrong are the type of NCOs who make sure the Oregon National Guard Black Hawk mission stays successful, no matter the hours they have to put in, Edgecomb said.

“Part of our mission set here is the search and rescue, and 85 percent of those seem to happen on a Sunday at 3 p.m. when no one is working,” Edgecomb said. “Those are two guys who I can always call, and if they are not working (at their civilian job) they will always volunteer to come in and do a search and rescue. They are so important to our program. Without the M-Day guys who volunteer, we wouldn’t be able to do any of this stuff.”

The NCOs in the Oregon National Guard are a special group of men and women, Edgecomb said.

“We have a variety of skill sets and civilian jobs,” he said. “We’ve got nurses, Sjullie is a paramedic in real life. We have engineers, a broad spectrum. What I’m trying to say is we have a bunch of smart NCOs in our organization who have these high-profile civilian jobs, but they still choose to come in and be an E5 or E6 because of what they get to do: save lives and fly around in helicopters.”