

# Call to Duty

## Service to Country Takes Troopers to Distant Lands



Investigator Sherry Ferno also spends time working as First Lt. Sherry Ferno, commander of the Alaska Air National Guard 176th Security Forces Squadron.

Sherry Ferno has grown accustomed to splitting time between wearing two uniforms. She has worn a military uniform for more than 22 years as a member of the Air National Guard and worn a law enforcement uniform 16 years – the past eight as an Alaska State Trooper. During that time, she’s had to juggle her duty to her country, state and community. Ferno is one of many Department of Public Safety employees who fill dual roles as public servants to both Alaska and the United States. The military tradition is rich within the Department of Public Safety. Many DPS employees have worn a military uniform either in the past or are now serving, whether it’s once a month or during a long deployment overseas in support of a military operation. At the core of this connection is the willingness to serve their nation and state. In addition, like many “weekend warriors” as those in the Guard and Reserves are often called, Ferno’s military obligation includes spending many months overseas and away from her job in Alaska.

Deployments often uproot the service member from families and a full-time job. Part-time soldiers, sailors, Marines, coastguardsmen and airmen that are thrust into the role full time leave behind family, friends and co-workers. While deployed, they often leave vacant full-time positions, putting added strain in places that are already stretched thin by staffing shortages. Ferno is the latest DPS employee to return from an overseas deployment in support of either Operation Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom. Ferno, a trooper with the Alaska Bureau of Investigation in Palmer, just returned from a six-month deployment to an undisclosed location in Southeast Asia. As commander of the 176<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron for the past four years, Ferno knows all too well about the battle to manage personnel. She commands over 70 airmen, some of which



November 2012

Story by Beth Ipsen  
Public Information Office



First Lt. Sherry Ferno, who is an investigator for the Alaska State Troopers, presented DPS Commissioner Joseph Masters a flag on Oct. 30 in appreciation for the support the department gives its employees during military deployments. Pictured from left to right are DPS members Maj. Dennis Casanovas, Capt. Craig Allen, Col. Keith Mallard and Commissioner Masters, and Air National Guard members Ferno, Col. Patty Wilbanks, Chief Master Sgt. Curtis Brenton, Master Sgt. Thomas Gregory.

were on this deployment.

Not long after her return on Oct. 16, she presented a flag and certificate to DPS Commissioner Joseph Masters in appreciation for the department's continued support of employees during deployments. The flag was flown over Afghanistan on May 25, 2012.

"We don't always say thank you," Ferno said. "This is my family. Sgt. Burkmire and the guys came to the airport and welcomed me back. How many other employers do that?"

Ferno's military boss, Col. Patty Wilbanks, commander of the 176<sup>th</sup> Mission Support Group, also thanked Commissioner Masters and the rest of Ferno's DPS bosses – Col. Keith Mallard, Maj. Dennis Casanovas and Capt. Craig Allen – for allowing Ferno the valuable time away from her trooper job and much needed support for her military job. Ferno's weekly schedule includes working four 10-hour days as an ABI investigator, and eight hours on Monday wearing lieutenant bars and an Air Force uniform. There's also the one weekend a month and two weeks a year obligation to the Guard.

"She's a workaholic," Wilbanks said, which was no surprise to her trooper bosses. So much so, Ferno had a hard time making sure she took a break getting adjusted to being back on American soil by getting re-acclimated to Alaska's much colder temperatures and used to sleeping in a real bed before jumping back into investigations on Nov 6.

The majority of her squadron deployed and provided security for a small U.S. section on another country's military base. Meanwhile, she worked on anti-terrorism by providing daily threat updates to the command staff. When the intelligence gathered showed the threat was low enough, she and other Americans made trips to the neighboring town. The heat forced her to change her running routine to 4 a.m. Luckily, sandstorms were rare. She and her airmen spent the first part of the deployment living in tents and learned to sleep through winds of up to 50 mph that rattled the sides of the tents.

"It was like camping out," she said.

They eventually moved into metal huts she said they called pods.

"The first night we moved in, nobody got any sleep because it was too quiet," Ferno said.

\*\*\*

Some DPS employees work and deploy together. Mat-Su Valley Wildlife Trooper John Cyr and Soldotna Trooper Sgt. Larry Erickson deployed to Qatar in 2007-2008 as part of the Air National Guard's 176<sup>th</sup> Logistics Readiness Squadron (see [Trooper](#)



First Lt. Sherry Ferno stands beside her home away from Alaska during her six-month deployment to Southeast Asia this year.

[Times](#) story). Bethel Trooper Matt Heieren and Justin Lindell of the Wildlife Investigations Unit are both UH-60 Blackhawk pilots with the Army National Guard. They deployed together to Iraq and flew either in the same helicopter or in partner helicopters during missions transporting troops and VIPs from Baghdad and around Iraq.

"I was either talking with him in the cockpit or over the radio during missions," Heieren said. "Aside from being hot and sweaty all the time, it was a good learning experience."

Heieren, who was in the Marine Corps Reserve as an infantryman from 1999 to 2003, joined the Army National Guard specifically to fly helicopters. Heieren became a trooper in 2001 and has spent a good portion of the last four years concentrating on his military duties. First it was the year and a half at flight school in Alabama, and within a year of returning to Alaska and his job as a trooper, Heieren, Lindell and others in their company deployed to Iraq. Heieren acknowledged his supportive supervisor, Sgt. Mike Duxbury, made the military commitments and time away from Alaska and his wife easier for the couple.

However, Heieren admits the two careers require a bit of juggling.

"It's not easy balancing two different careers," Heieren said.

Nonetheless, he believes serving his country is worth the sacrifice.



Troopers Matt Heieren (front left) and Justin Lindell (front right) hold the Alaska State Troopers flag they flew over Iraq during their deployment with the Army National Guard in 2007-2008.



Fairbanks Alaska State Trooper Brian Zeisel served as a member of a protection team while deployed to Kyrgyzstan from September 2007 to 2008. He also got a chance to work with military working dogs on the base. In this photo, he holds a puppy at the Kyrgyz version of a military canine kennel. That love for dogs helped him become a trooper canine handler after his deployment ended.

\*\*\*

The training and experience that a person gains while in the military is often a useful tool for his or her DPS job and vice versa.

Alaska State Trooper Brian Zeisel deployed to Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan with the Alaska Air National Guard 168<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron for six months from September 2007 to March 2008 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He served as the base security forces investigator and was the wing commander's personal security protection when he traveled off base to the U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan was the jump off point for troops going in and out of Afghanistan. Zeisel also assisted the Office of Special Investigations, the Air Force's version of ABI, on some of its investigations because of his experience as a trooper.

"My experience as an Alaska State Trooper more than prepared me for the mission,"

he said. He received the Air Force Commendation Medal for his achievements during the deployment.

Also during this deployment, Zeisel had the opportunity to work with the military working dogs on the base. Shortly after his return to Alaska and his trooper job, a canine position opened up. Now, he and four-legged partner Argo keep busy as a patrol and drug detection canine team in Fairbanks.

"I am very blessed to be part of both of these great organizations," he wrote in an email. "I also appreciate the support AST and this state provides for employees who are members of the military guard or reserves."

Likewise, Americans and Alaskans are blessed to have Zeisel and many DPS employees who have stepped forward to serve their country and state.