



Photo by Army Multimedia and Visual Information Directorate

Augustine and Sons, Inc receives the 2007 Freedom Award at a Sept. 12 ceremony in Washington, DC. Left to right are Under Secretary of Defense Dr. David Chu, Assistant Secretary of Defense Thomas Hall, Dan Augustine, Mike Augustine, and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. James Cartwright.

Involving Employers in Deployment

The best employers receive honors for service on the home front.

By Sara Graves

When 1st Sgt. Matthew T. Strasser received orders in 2007 for his deployment to Afghanistan, he quickly notified his employer Dan Augustine, co-owner of Augustine and Sons, Inc.

Strasser was one of only two employees outside the Augustine family who worked on the family-owned farm in Rose Hill, Iowa. This would be his second tour of duty in five years.

Having been through this once before, the Strassers and Augustines knew what needed to be done to prepare for Strasser's deployment.

When Strasser deployed a few months later with the 16-man "Hammer" team from the Iowa National Guard to help train Afghan National Army soldiers, the Augustine family quickly stepped in to support Strasser's wife Jessica and her two sons, Reece, 9, and Tyler, 7.

During the deployment, the Augustines allowed the family to live rent-free in a house the Augustines owned. The company also paid Strasser's yearly bonus while he was deployed, regularly picked up the Strasser boys so they could visit the Augustine farm, helped Jessica and her sons care for their six cattle, as well as helping them with household maintenance.

"They do so much for us, I mean, stuff that they don't have to do," Jessica told the American Forces Press Service at the time. "They take the time to help us out."

Augustine and Sons, Inc. was nominated that year for the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, the highest award for employer support of the National Guard and Reserves.

The Augustines were among 15 recipients of the 2007 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award handed

out in Washington, D.C, by the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). Other recipients that year included General Motors Corp., Detroit, Mich.; Sodexo USA, Gaithersburg, Md.; Con-way Inc., San Mateo, Calif., and the State of Tennessee.

Theresa Augustine said, "Jessica and the boys have a greater hardship when Matt is gone than we do. We do what we can to support Matt in his military duties."

For Strasser, notifying his employer of his impending deployment quickly was one of the most important first steps he could take in preparing for his deployment.

With advance notice, the Augustines were able to make the necessary arrangements to assist the Strasser's family while he was deployed and to secure additional help on their farm in Strasser's absence.

"Give employers as much notice as possible so they can plan for your absence," said Tom Bullock, Chief of Employer Outreach of ESGR. "It helps build support for the Guard and Reserve."

ESGR representative Ray Luppe adds, "A soldier should be up front regarding the possibility of deployment even before orders are cut."

Another suggestion Bullock offers to Guard and Reserve members is to inform coworkers you are in the Guard or Reserve in a "non-boastful way," well in advance of any deployment.

He also suggests encouraging employers to sign an ESGR Employer Statement of Support, www.esgr.org/sos, which states that the employer agrees to abide by the statutes outlined in the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Acts (USERRA), the federal law which protects service members while they are deployed away from the workplace. More information on USERRA can be found in the accompanying sidebar.

"Educate employers and co-workers in order to avoid conflict," Luppe said. "Sharing information on training and exercises and all the rest with supervisors and coworkers is a great way to get them used to the idea that their employee and (coworker) is also a soldier."

Bullocks further advises service members to stay in touch with employers and coworkers during the deployment to notify them of what is going on concerning "the non-classified

portions of the mission."

And to honor those employers or supervisors who are supportive of the guardsmen or reservists, Bullock suggests nominating them for an ESGR Patriot Award on the ESGR website, www.esgr.org/patriot, or by calling the ESGR at (800) 336-4590.

Once employers receive a Patriot Award, they may be considered for progressive and sequential ESGR awards: the Above and Beyond and the Pro Patria Awards, both of which are awarded by the ESGR field committees. Additional awards include the Seven Seals Award (Seals of the seven Reserve components), which is presented by ESGR Field Committees to individuals who have provided superior support to the ESGR mission.

The Freedom Award, which was given to the Augustines, is the highest award the U.S. government presents to employers of guardsmen and reservists. The employer classifications include large employers, small employers and public sector.

"There aren't many ways beyond saying thank you for me to show the Augustines how much I appreciate their unceasing support at a time when my family needed it most," Strasser said in a 2007 letter posted on the ESGR website.

Today, Strasser is back at work on the Augustine farm. And with the possibility of another deployment in a year, Theresa Augustine said Strasser could be assured his family will again be cared for in his absence. **AF**

▶ KNOWING YOUR EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

According to the ESGR website, "...members of the Guard and Reserve, as well as their employers, do not always have a clear understanding about employment and re-employment rights for Reserve component members. Federal law guarantees the right to take time off from work to attend to your military responsibilities.

The more that you, your boss and your personnel office know about the federal laws and legal precedents that spell out Reserve reemployment rights, rules and obligations protected by the laws, the less chance there is for misunderstanding.

Basically, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) provides that an employer must give you time off to perform military service and re-employ you following the service with status, seniority and rate of pay as though you never left. The employer cannot discriminate against you because of your military connection.

This protection applies to employees who are full-time, part-time or probationary, so long as the employment is not brief, no recurring, and not expected to continue for a significant period."

For more information regarding your protection under the USERRA law, visit www.dol.gov/elaws/userra.htm or call the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) at (866) 4 USA DOL.



Photo by Wes Keppelman, courtesy The Oklahoman Herald

1st Sgt. Matt Strasser meets with neighbors in Rose Hill, Iowa.