

Senior Enlisted Leaders Conference:

Army, Air Guard Enlisted Leaders Seek Common Ground

By Master Sgt. Bob Haskell

National Guard Bureau

The stars of the National Guard's Army and Air Force enlisted force gathered near one of this country's pivotal battlegrounds to explore ways to work in closer harmony – more jointly – as spring came to the Adirondacks in mid-April.

Eighty Army Guard state command sergeants major and Air Guard command chief master sergeants, whose stripes are punctuated with stars, from 46 states and territories took part in the first Senior Enlisted Leaders Conference ever sponsored by the National Guard Bureau. The New York National Guard hosted the event.

The intent was to bring the state senior enlisted leaders from the two distinct military cultures closer together at a time when they are expected to work together as a joint force, explained Command Sgt. Maj. David Ray Hudson, the senior enlisted leader for the chief of the National Guard Bureau. Hudson organized the event.

Both Guard forces share the same goal, to support their states and defend their country when they are needed. But they do that in considerably different ways.

LTG H Steven Blum has been stressing the importance of a joint National Guard force since becoming the chief of the Guard Bureau five Aprils ago. But some places are joint only in name, in the form of joint staff signs on the wall, Hudson observed, because the Army and Air Guard cultures and funding procedures remain so disparate.

The idea of a joint force is here to stay, Hudson told the group. "I truly believe that jointness for the National Guard in the future is rock solid. That is a good thing," he said.

The four-day conference that began April 18 in this historic city north of Albany was intended to narrow the cultural gap or, at the very least, create a better understanding of how the other half lives among the senior sergeants and chiefs who are mentoring the younger enlisted people in their states.

In all, about 135 Guard people took part in the conference a few miles from the Saratoga battlefield where, in October 1777, an American Army soundly defeated a British army during the Revolutionary War, forcing the surrender of up to 5,000 soldiers. That victory led to French recognition for the fledgling United States and prompted France to provide financial and military



New York Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Thomas McCauley, left, from the 109th Airlift Wing, presented Command Sgt. Maj. David Ray Hudson with a jet-assisted takeoff (JATO) bottle during the National Guard Bureau's first Senior Enlisted Leaders Conference in mid-April. Hudson, the Guard Bureau's senior enlisted leader, led the four-day conference for Army and Air Guard enlisted leaders in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. The Air Guard uses JATO bottles to give aircraft such as C-130 transports extra thrust during difficult takeoff situations.

Photo by Master Sgt. Bob Haskell, National Guard Bureau

support for the Americans during their fight for independence.

It was hoped that the National Guard conference here more than 230 years later would be a similar kind of turning point in the relations between Army and Air National Guard's 457,000 enlisted members.

"We're learning about each other because we do have different ways of doing business. The ranks are different. The way we get paid is different. The way we travel is different," said New York state Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Van Pelt during a press conference at the New York State Military Museum, near the conference center. "The best way to understand your counterpart is to sit next to him and train with him."

The enlisted leaders spent the first day exploring 22 of their services' fundamental differences – their rank structures, their physical fitness standards, how the Army Guard's platoons and the Air Guard's flights are organized, how they wear their uniforms, and how their members are evaluated each year.

They spent the final day contemplating the Guard Bureau chief's message about their roles in making the Guard a truly joint force.

"If we're really going to make this joint force work, you have to be the bricks and mortar to hold it together for us," Blum said. "You're the ones who have to make this force work. You're going to have to get the young noncommissioned officers to understand what you're living."

It is especially critical, Blum added, because the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, that President Bush signed Jan. 28, made the National Guard Bureau a joint activity under the secretary of defense. Gone are the days when the Army Guard was affiliated with the secretary of the Army and the Air Guard was tied to the secretary of the Air Force.

"It's not going away, and we're not going back," vowed Blum about the joint force.

The two services already work together in some capacities. The Guard's 22-member civil support teams that exist in every state and territory, for example, include Army and Air Guard members.

"I'm combat communications by trade. I've been joint for my entire career. To me, this comes easy," said Chief Master Sgt. Chris Muncy, the Ohio Air Guard's state command chief, who has dealt with many military cultures.

"But it helps to be the linguist.

"A lot of people never get out of their lane," Muncy added. "A conference like this shows them the importance of being that linguist so they can explain to soldiers and airmen the differences [in the services] and what they bring to the fight."

Army and Air Guard personnel may work together at the joint state headquarters, but "they haven't worked that closely together out in the field," observed Chief Master Sgt. Michael Dalton, Michigan's state command chief, about the fact that Air and Army Guard

units have traditionally trained as separate entities.

"The Air Force is assisting the Army more and more in places like Iraq. We're working side by side more and more, and we are getting to know each other," Dalton added. "We can only go so far when it comes to maintaining our equipment, for example, but in leadership training there are a lot of things we could do together.

"We have learned quite a lot about each other over the years," Dalton said, "but there's still a lot to learn." **R&NG**