
'Best Job in the Army'

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"Being a warrant officer is the best job in the Army," **Chief Warrant Officer 3 Steve Stolarczyk** said standing inside a helicopter hangar near Aberdeen, Md.

Stolarczyk speaks about his job duties with confidence. As a pilot and warrant officer, he is expected to be an expert in Army aviation. "We come in, and we're expected to fly and do the mission," he said. My job is to "fly, instruct and maintain the aircraft." Warrant officers are known as the "technical and tactical" leaders in the Army. They're the ones who are specialized in their military duties and can teach other soldiers about what they do best. The warrant officer corps exists in all three Army components.

Warrant officers, upon their initial appointment, derive their authority from the secretary of the Army. But when promoted to chief warrant officer 2, they receive a commission similar to that of a regular Army officer—except they are specialists instead of generalists. There are 25,000 warrant officers in the Army today, slightly less than 3 percent of the force. Like many warrant officers in the Army, Stolarczyk is an aviator. He is also a guardsman. Over half of the 7,214 warrant officers in the Army National Guard fly helicopters.

In a way, the aviation warrant officers in the 158th Cavalry Regiment encapsulate the challenges facing soldiers across all components. They must adapt to changing technological demands, keep current in their professions, juggle family duties and responsibilities, be prepared to deploy and, for reservists and guardsmen, maintain their civilian careers. This is a look at how they are meeting those challenges, and how they work together to keep the unit ready in an era of high operating tempo. A member of the Maryland Army National Guard's 158th Cavalry Regiment, Stolarczyk is preparing to fly the new additions to his unit's fleet come next year – AH-64 Apaches. But as a guardsman, learning to fly these helicopters requires juggling responsibilities among employers, family and the Army.

"You have to be able to juggle those balls," said **Chief Warrant Officer 4 Ray Johnson**, also a pilot with the 158th. A Maryland citizen-soldier since 1974 after leaving the active Army, Johnson leads by example. This summer he spent eight weeks at Fort Rucker, Ala., flying Black Hawk helicopters and adding another instructor pilot certification to his resume. "I always wanted to be an IP," he said. "You're never too old" to earn [another] one. Johnson also wears another uniform; that of a Maryland state police trooper. He flies helicopters for the police special operations unit while pursuing vehicles fleeing authorities, providing aerial surveillance for police officers on the ground or assisting with medical evacuations. But when Johnson puts on his guardsman's uniform with silver and the black bars of a CW4, he serves as a specialist in aviation, and mentor to younger warrant officers. To be fully prepared to fly the Apache, Johnson says junior warrant officers "have to decide to devote a lot of time to their training-up period by learning its capabilities and limitations. "Be prepared to train hard," he tells them. "As an instructor, you have to motivate these guys," he said.

With the active Army handing over its older Apache airframes in exchange for new Apache Longbow helicopters, and eventually the RAH-66 Comanche helicopters, Army National Guard units are receiving those Apaches to support the active Army and to conduct homeland security missions. Also known as the Governor 's Guard, the 158th is assigned to perform aerial reconnaissance and surveillance operations. It's also called on to assist civil authorities with when natural disasters strike.

When Hurricane Isabel slammed into the East Coast this September, the 158th assisted civilian police and medical personnel with security operations and medical evacuations. And after a tornado ripped through the town of La Plata, Md., last year, the 158th was called to provide air

inspections for local, state and federal government leaders of the damage caused by the tornado.

Once the unit is fully qualified to field Apaches in two years, it will also be capable of supporting U.S. military missions overseas, including current operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. While the unit has not been mobilized to fly in current U.S. military operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, some pilots have gone to Afghanistan voluntarily. "It's actually a benefit because they're coming back to our unit" and they'll have Apache flight experience, said Stolarczyk. But, "It's the unit's responsibility and your responsibility to do your training in-house. The training that you do at the school teaches you the basics," he said. He added that the unit as a whole "can get up to speed quicker because we've been flying as a unit for so long." Training pilots to fly the Apache takes close to a year, and includes attending a 12-week Apache flight training school, normally at Fort Rucker, Ala., and mission training with a unit before pilots are fully qualified to fly the aircraft.

Right now, "we want to maintain [the warrant officers' focus] on the [OH-] 58s before they go to school" to fly the Apache, Col. Michael Sweeney, Maryland Army National Guard's state aviation officer, said. Today, the 158th flies OH-58A/C helicopters to conduct reconnaissance, search, support and surveillance missions. UH-60 Black Hawks that the unit has been flying for five years are used as utility helicopters. The first Apache airframes are expected to arrive in May. "As far as readiness goes, we're doing the best we can," Sweeney said. "The guys who are here are just amazingly flexible with their [training] time. "I can honestly say that they're all listening and doing" all they've been asked to as warrant officers, he added. There have been some problems in minimum flight time requirements, he said, but the maintenance and financial stresses his unit is going through are not unlike those with other National Guard aviation units or across the entire Army. National Guard warrant officers are given 96 hours flying time a year, the same as the active Army.

Maryland's first **Chief Warrant Officer 5, Keith Harris**, has been responsible for keeping the unit's Black Hawk helicopters in the air. He saw some challenges when the Apaches come on board next spring. "Maintenance of the aircraft is going to be very challenging. We are not going to be on the top of the list for parts," Harris said. "There's only so many Apaches, and so many parts," he said. With limited dollars for training, parts and other resources, "it's been painful here, but at the same time it has been painful everywhere," Sweeney said. The National Guard, like the rest of the Army, is changing its organization and structure, he said. But for guardsmen, finding time for training both at home and away at flight schools can be a challenge.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Dave Whitehead planned on going to Western Army National Guard Aviation Training site in Arizona this December for his 12 weeks of flight training on the Apache. The flight school was canceled, however, meaning he'll have to wait for another opportunity to come up next year. "You join the guard, but you need to train somewhere," Whitehead said. Sometimes this means traveling to Fort Bragg, N.C., or Fort Rucker, Ala., the home of Army aviation, where Apache flight simulators are available. "In order to maintain our skill level, we have to fly," Whitehead said. "You'd be amazed how much you lose from your control touch." "Really, any time you get into the cockpit you're training," Whitehead added. But Whitehead also has an employer to worry about. A Medevac pilot for Keystone Helicopter, Altoona, Pa., Whitehead said he'll still receive a leave of absence without pay when it's needed. However, "It's going to be difficult for them to cover my spot" during flight school, he said.

Employer support has "not been a problem" for Stolarczyk either. In fact, flying for his current employer, United Airlines' express air shuttle service out of Dulles International Airport, Va., is a direct result of his Army pilot training, Stolarczyk said. "My aviation time in the guard gave me the opportunity to pick up my commercial rating at a faster pace," he said. "Army aviation really gave me the opportunity to become a commercial pilot," he said, adding that civilian aviator employers recognize that the "Army produces a very high-quality product." Employer support for the unit has been "fantastic. None of these guys would be here" without that, Sweeney said. He also said family support programs are in place "so the soldier can focus on their job." He said the 158th has benefited from strong family support programs over the years. But family members can suffer due to the ample time needed for flight training and proficiency.

Speaking at the Army Family Action Planning conference in November in suburban Washington, Lt. Gen.

Roger Schultz, director of the Army National Guard, said he's not sure if guardsmen fully understand what family well-being initiatives are doing for soldiers. "If we have one challenge, it would be communicating," he said, later adding that the families of citizen-soldiers mobilized for deployments overseas with little notice need special attention. "The strength of our Army is in our soldiers. The strength in our Army is in our families," Schultz said. But even for guardsmen like trooper Johnson – who is often away from home working for his civilian employer or on guard duty – family hardships exist. It's difficult on my wife "because there are a lot of times where she needs me," Johnson said. "She tries to support me, but it's hard for her," he said.

For **Chief Warrant Officer 2 Brian Carver**, who left active duty as an enlisted soldier at Fort Drum, N.Y., in May 2002, becoming a warrant officer allows him to remain close to his wife and two children and still fly helicopters. "For me, I can continue to do the job that I loved to do when I was in the active Army," Carver said, who was a helicopter mechanic as an active duty soldier, but is now flying helicopters as a guardsman. Carver didn't find employment immediately after he left the active Army, so he took care of his six weeks of warrant officer candidate school and 12-week Apache flight course before looking further for work. Carver is now training to be a Baltimore County police officer and will graduate Dec. 19 from the police academy. With the weekend trips down to Fort Bragg for simulator training and live flight training in Maryland, "it's been difficult because I'm [attending] the academy," Carver said. And, as for being prepared to fly the Apache, "They've done a very good job of getting me integrated," Carver said. The guard unit aviators have to meet the same standards as the active Army, he said. "And, I think they perform just as well as our active duty soldiers," Sweeney said.