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GUEST COLUMNIST

South Carolina – working to be the most military-friendly state

RICHARD ECKSTROM
South Carolina Comptroller



Many things make South Carolina a special state. Some are wellknown, such as our state’s warm climate, its beautiful natural resources that stretch from the mountains to the coast and the hospitable, welcoming ways of our people.

But there’s something else that makes South Carolina special, too, and it’s beginning to be more fully recognized and valued.

Our state is military-friendly — we like to think it’s even the most military-friendly state in the nation.

This is worth remembering any time — but especially this time of year, when we celebrate Veterans Day and Thanksgiving.

As we do, we remember the tens of thousands of our brave men and women still in harm’s way, engaged in a war in Afghanistan.

Here at home, thoughts of our troops and prayers for their safety were in the hearts and minds of countless South Carolinians as parades and other ceremonies took place across the state on Veterans Day.

The same was true as families gathered for a day set apart to give thanks amid hearty meals and festive fellowship.

Indeed we're deeply thankful for the service of our fellow Americans who risk their lives to defend our country.

In South Carolina, though, our gratitude is not just a seasonal thing.

Visit just about any community in our state and you'll experience South Carolina's military-friendly culture firsthand. You'll read about it in newspapers. You'll hear about it as active-duty and retired service members tell how they've been welcomed here, and you'll see it in the many outreach efforts of local governments and civic groups.

Think about the efforts of various leaders in Columbia to make our state capital "the most military-friendly community" in the country.

That's not just wishful thinking, either: Columbia was ranked the top place in South Carolina for veterans to live in a recent survey by USAA, a financial services firm catering to military members, and by Military.com, an online news and membership organization.

Bob Cartee of Spartanburg, a Navy veteran who's now a member of the S.C. State Guard, exemplifies South Carolina's military friendliness at the individual level.

After Cartee became caretaker of the cemetery at his church, Oak Grove Baptist, he spearheaded an effort to create a granite memorial honoring all veterans who've been laid to rest in the cemetery. Numbering 116, some have military service dating back to the Civil War.

"They need something to honor them and remember them," Cartee told the Spartanburg Herald Journal in a recent article.

At the state level, the S.C. Military Base Task Force works to make the state more military-friendly, but its efforts also go beyond that.

Established by an executive order of the governor, the Task Force is an advocate for the Palmetto State's vast military resources and personnel. The Task Force is represented by people from each of the state's four "military communities" with installations: Beaufort, Charleston, Columbia and Sumter.

In my role as chairman of the Task Force, I encourage members to work actively to support the needs of our bases and their communities.

These activities vary from seeking helpful state legislation, such as a bill that passed this year to provide in-state tuition rates to active-duty personnel and their dependents, to national issues, such as dealing with deep federal cuts to military funding that could begin in January under what's known in budget language as "sequestration."

In fact, the Task Force met recently in Columbia to consider those potential cuts, which will total several hundred billion dollars unless Congress and President Obama act soon to prevent them, and other important matters concerning the state's military installations.

Prior to the meeting, the Task Force released a report by the S.C. Department of Commerce revealing that the military generated \$15.7 billion in economic activity in South Carolina in 2011, supporting more than 138,000 jobs across our state.

But the Palmetto State's military presence is about more than just economic statistics.

It's about people — the men and women who serve in uniform; their children who temporarily live here and might one day make South Carolina their home; and the military retirees who have chosen to do just that.

If each of us will do our part to honor them and make them feel a welcomed part of our own neighborhood and community, then South Carolina truly will be the most military-friendly state in America.

[Return to top](#)

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