



## State Guard more than military fraternity

SEPTEMBER 29, 2012 8:45 AM • BY RICHARD ECKSTROM

In today's uncertain economy, lots of college students are anxious about finding good jobs in their chosen career fields.

That seems to have become a fact of life today even for the approximately 2,300 cadets enrolled at South Carolina's prestigious military college, The Citadel.

The armed forces offer a natural career path for Citadel cadets, yet many of them opt for civilian employment after they graduate. For them, there's still an opportunity outside their civilian workplace to serve in uniform other than through the U.S. military reserve programs.

In fact, it's an opportunity available to most every South Carolinian.

It's called the S.C. State Guard.

With origins tracing to the colonial militia, the modern day State Guard was formally established under state law during World War II. Its purpose: to serve as a state defense force in the event of natural disasters and other emergencies.

Today's State Guard is an unpaid, all-volunteer force numbering more than 700 from all regions of the state. It adheres to military customs and mirrors the rank structure and the uniform standards of the Army, yet its members can never be called into combat or required to leave the state.

As commander of the State Guard, I see firsthand the valuable role it plays in South Carolina – and the opportunity it provides its members to serve their communities.

When Hurricane Hugo devastated the Lowcountry in 1989, State Guardsmen with chainsaws opened some of the first passable eastbound traffic lanes within hours to begin a daunting recovery and relief effort. More recently, State Guard volunteers served in the Gulf Coast region after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Our volunteers also served in New York City following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the governor of New York came here afterward to personally thank our members who volunteered their help.

The State Guard is not well known, and some folks might perceive it as little more than a fraternity of ex-military weekend warrior types who like to hang out in uniform.

Make no mistake – that is a gross misperception.

The reality is that having prior military service is not a requirement for State Guard membership. While our ranks include many former armed services personnel, they also include members who have no prior military service but who have useful skills and a dedication to serve their fellow citizens.

Indeed, that's the main quality the State Guard seeks – dedication.

Our members devote some of their most precious commodity – time – to train as a team to respond to community emergencies resulting from natural or man-made causes. And most importantly, they rapidly answer the call with “boots on the ground” when South Carolinians or their fellow Americans need help.

On a recent Saturday (Sept. 22), the dedication of the State Guard was obvious during a training exercise in Francis Marion National Forest close to where Hurricane Hugo made landfall in 1989.

Gathering at the national forest whose namesake held command in the forerunner to our State Guard, many of our members participated in a grueling 15-mile hike under hot and humid conditions carrying backpacks weighing 75 pounds.

The goal was to practice delivering relief supplies by the most basic of means – on foot, so that, if necessary, critical supplies can be delivered quickly even if roads become impassable for delivery vehicles. And it was a major success, as the participants transported a full ton of material by the strength of their backs.

The hike was a joint exercise between the State Guard and The Citadel. More than 40 Citadel cadets, six of whom belong to the State Guard, also participated.

We encourage South Carolinians between the ages of 17 and 70 and from all walks of life to join our ranks to protect and serve the communities of South Carolina. If you are interested in learning more about membership, call 803-299-4238 or toll-free at 866-238-3181, or visit our website at [sg.sc.gov](http://sg.sc.gov).

***Richard Eckstrom is comptroller general of South Carolina.***