

FIGHTING FIRE with COLLABORATION

STORY and PHOTOS by CPT MATTHEW RILEY KENTUCKY ARMY NATIONAL GUARD



COMMANDING an Army National Guard Fire Fighting Detachment is a unique opportunity for any officer. Subsequent to a realignment within the 761st Engineer Detachment Firefighting Team in late 2015, the commander position changed from a warrant officer position to that of a captain.

I admit that I was not thrilled when I received a call from my battalion commander telling me I was being moved from my command of HHC, 206th EN BN, to the 761st. I had no experience in the field of firefighting and had already strategized for my second year in command at the HHC. But I saluted, moved out, and determined to make the best of it.

Little did I know the educating, eye-opening experience I was to find.

One of the first directives given to me by the battalion commander was to cultivate a relationship with the fire department of the Kentucky Air Guard's 123rd Airlift Wing. During a meeting in November 2015, the 761st was invited to join the 123rd for Annual Training (AT) at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center in Alpena, MI. The training site was the second organization in the National Guard to be

certified as a Joint National Training Center, claims the largest airspace east of the Mississippi River, and encompasses 147,000 acres for use by ground maneuver units. Additionally, Alpena provides copious and high-quality training opportunities for firefighters. After gaining approval from the battalion commander and the Kentucky Army National Guard, the 761st began planning for a joint AT.

AT was set for 12–19 June 2016. The 761st and 123rd firefighters traveled to Alpena via a C-130. This mode of transportation allowed the 761st to treat the AT like a deployment and soldiers were trained accordingly, to include a deliberate reception, staging, onward movement, and integration piece.

In the early stages of the joint training, several airmen and soldiers were apprehensive of working side-by-side. But only a couple days later, everything clicked and the reluctance was replaced with requests for more of the same.

The primary focus was on completing Training and Evaluation Outline tasks such as airfield rescue firefighting, structural firefighting/search and rescue, vehicle fire/extrication, HAZMAT incident operations, fire department

maintenance, and water tanker re-supply operations

The 761st completed some unit-centric training, such as CPR re-certifications and first-aid, but the majority of training included working alongside the experienced 123rd.

A major benefit of joint training was the sharing of knowledge from subject-matter experts. The majority of soldiers assigned to the 761st are young and/or inexperienced firefighters, while the 123rd Airmen are senior and seasoned, most of them civilian firefighters as well. It was incredibly profitable for our soldiers to be instructed and validated by them.

As a firefighting team, the 761st could at any time be called to assist local civilian agencies. This AT also provided the 761st a familiarization with interoperability and interagency operations. In addition to being one of our primary tasks, joint operations are becoming more prevalent in today's military. The training allowed 761st soldiers to experience integration with another firefighting agency. It was a genuine pleasure to watch my soldiers enthusiastically throw themselves headlong into training. It was equally gratifying to see them engage so professionally with firefighters from a sister service.

A byproduct of that co-operation is a synergy for future real-world missions in Kentucky. The firefighters of the Kentucky Army and Air National Guard worked exceptionally well together. If an emergency situation in the Commonwealth of Kentucky required both military firefighting agencies to work together, we will be well prepared to do so.

Whatever doubts I had last year about commanding a firefighting unit were quickly disappearing as multiple soldiers of the 761st commented that they had learned more from this AT than during previous training events.

The Army works in mysterious ways. If someone had told me a year ago that I would soon be changing units, taking command of soldiers with a job I had no idea about, and needed to work with the Air Force, it certainly would have been one of the greatest shocks of my career.

Serving as the Commander of the 761st Engineer Detachment has proven to be a great experience, and leading in a joint AT venture with the Air Guard was the highlight. I strongly encourage other National Guard Firefighting Team commanders to seek similar opportunities within their respective states. 

