

THE NATIONAL GUARD

In Aftermath of War at Home, Soldiers Prepare to Face It Abroad

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zero, where they assisted the wounded, retrieved body parts from the streets and began setting up the security perimeter behind firefighters still trying to control the roaring blazes in buildings near the rubble.

Soldiers interviewed yesterday said the experience had left them forever changed. "I'll never forget the rest of my life coming out of Battery Tunnel and coming into what looked like a nuclear winter," a colonel said. "The whole area of Manhattan was just deserted, and it was covered with three inches of ash, powder, and smoke. We didn't have any respirators, and my throat physically felt like it was closing. We were gasping for air."

In every direction were terrifying scenes. The blown-over trees, all facing the same direction, where the ground like collapsing buildings moved through Liberty Park. The armed police and firefighters looking helplessly, wondering what building might fall next. The

Capt. Kevin Reilly, the 101st Cavalry's assistant operations officer, said even what was missing had been terrifying.

"There ain't no desks, there ain't no computers, there ain't no concrete slabs or copper pipes," he said. "Everything is just this fine cremation ash."

But as bad as the scenes were at the outset, they only got worse.

1st Col. Geoffrey J. Slack, commander of the First of the 69th, said a member of his infantry battalion, Gerard Baptiste, who was also a New York City firefighter, was still missing in the piles. Colonel Slack said he also learned, a few days into the rescue effort, that another soldier had a brother who was lost as well.

"I asked him, 'Why didn't you tell anyone,'" the colonel said yesterday. "He told me, 'Sir, because I think maybe I can find him.'"

Since the first few hundred soldiers arrived, many thousand more have been assigned to missions supporting the rescue effort. Scott O. Sandman, a spokesman for the state Division of Military and Naval Affairs, said yesterday that the mobilization had just met a plateau.

90 "Last Tuesday evening we had 1,500 troops mobilized in the New York City area," he said. "The number has reached 5,000, and we're currently meeting all our mission requirements. Barring any changes in mission, we're prepared to sustain that level of deployment as long as the governor tells us our presence is necessary."

Mr. Sandman said the missions to date included monitoring the air for chemical or biological contaminants, shuttling federal investigators in military trucks, providing bulk fuel service to rescue vehicles and construction equipment and providing bulk potable water service to the fire departments on the rubble pile. The guard's duties have also included traffic control and maintaining diesel electricity generators.

Some missions are narrow, like gathering 1,000 doses of tetanus shots from Veterans Affairs hospi-

After a week of continuous work at ground zero, New York soldiers wait for Chapter 2.

als and distributing them to doctors at the scene. Others are peculiar, like emptying mailboxes in the blocks around the impact area and delivering the outbound mail to the Postal Service. "It's a varied and wide array," Mr. Sandman said.

Like all National Guard units, these soldiers could also be mobilized federally, to fight, and yesterday the Guard's feelings about war were clear as they worked near the smoldering piles.

"Our troops were eager to answer the governor's call to support the people of New York in the wake of this horrific tragedy," said Maj. Gen. Thomas Maguire, New York's Guard commander. "They are likewise ea-

ger to do whatever our president and Congress deem necessary to ensure the security of our nation."

When another soldier, Sgt. Dennis Chevalier, was standing guard on West Street yesterday, he was approached by a civilian and asked, "Are you going to get those guys?" Sergeant Chevalier turned and replied, "I hope so."

"We get a lot of people saying that to us," Sergeant Chevalier said.

Colonel Slack sent his infantry soldiers home Sunday night for a break, and they stood in a formation at the Lexington Avenue armory, the same building where thousands of grieving family members had gathered to give DNA samples and review lists of identified bodies.

The First of the 69th's missions were complete, for now. Like President Bush, the colonel was looking ahead.

"I told them I was proud of what they had done and that I hoped that we would get a call to war," he said. "I know we have a score to settle."

Inside the armory, 300 infantrymen cheered.

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