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## V CORPS SOLDIERS SAY THEY JOINED THE ARMY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR AMERICA IN WAKE OF 9/11 ATTACKS

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**GRAFENWOEHR TRAINING AREA, Germany** – The events of September 11, 2001 shook many Americans, but not in the way the terrorists had hoped. Instead of running frightened, many Americans got angry and rose to the challenge of aiding of their injured country.



SPC REBECCA BURT

Pfc. Alexander Berkel, a helicopter armament electrician with V Corps' 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 159<sup>th</sup> Aviation, checks weapons on an AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopter during a recent training exercise at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany. Berkel joined the Army after his father survived being at 'Ground Zero' during the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

For Alexander Berkel, the attacks truly hit home. A resident of Brooklyn, N.Y., Berkel's father was at "Ground Zero" when the two airliners hijacked by terrorists hit the towers of the World Trade Center that day.

"My dad was working in a bank between the two towers," said Berkel. "When it happened, we didn't know if he'd survived or not. All the phones were tied up and we couldn't reach him, and that was really frightening."

Berkel's father found his way home safe and sound, but many of his co-workers weren't as lucky.

"When the first plane hit, he left, but those who didn't ... they didn't make it," said Berkel.

Though Berkel says he was already considering the military, the attack focused his thoughts of joining.

"I didn't decide to join right then, but later I figured I could either sit at home watching everything on the TV, or I could go out and do it myself," he said. "So here I am."

Berkel enlisted for training as a helicopter armament electrician. After that schooling, he was sent to join 7th Battalion, 159th Aviation in Illesheim, Germany, part of V Corps' 11th Aviation Regiment.

"I joined just prior to the war in Iraq, so I knew that I'd end up 'downrange.' All the drill sergeants (in basic training) kept telling us how important our training was, because we were headed to war," said Berkel, now a private first class.

Though he was fully prepared to deploy with the Soldiers of his new unit, he arrived just as they were returning from their tour supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I was a little disappointed, because I think I could have made a difference, too. But at the same time, I have to admit the idea of going to war is scary," said Berkel.

"Sometimes I feel like 'the new guy' because I didn't share that experience."

Though he missed the deployment, Berkel says he is concentrating on learning new skills and expanding his knowledge for another day when he might go. He says he knows that there are a lot of skills other Soldiers can pass to him, and he's willing to learn. After all, war isn't a game.

"To give up your friends, family and freedom to fight for someone else's freedom is serious," he said.



SPC REBECCA BURT

Pfc. Donna Gastellum, a fuel handler with V Corps' 6th Squadron, 6th Cavalry, refuels an AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopter during a recent training exercise at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany. Gastellum says she joined the Army after becoming angry at the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

It certainly became serious for Donna Gastelum, who says she had a happy life in Yakima, Wash. with her husband and two teenage daughters and a job she enjoyed at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks. But the blasts that shook New York shook the 34-year-old medical assistant as well.

"The attacks made me really, really angry. I couldn't sleep or relax, and I couldn't stop talking about how something needed to be done," said Gastelum. "One day my husband told me that if I felt so strongly about it, I should go do something."

That something for Gastelum was joining the Army.

"Being in the Army had never crossed my mind before, and both my kids thought I was nuts. But my husband had been in the Army and loved it, so he was supportive," she said.

Gastelum, now a private first class and a fuel handler with the 11th Aviation's 6th Squadron, 6th Cavalry, also in Illesheim, says she hasn't regretted that decision, or the fact that she was sent to Iraq almost directly after her initial entry training.

"I joined knowing I'd be going to Iraq. I joined because we were attacked, and I just wanted to help my country," she said. "I didn't care what my job was, or where I went. I just wanted to make a difference."

"I want my daughter to enjoy the same freedoms I have, and when that was threatened I knew I had to do something."

