

IRR SOLDIERS MUSTER IN PUERTO RICO

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Spc. Juan J. Perez was concerned he was getting recalled to active duty and expected to leave his wife and three kids again when the Army contacted him in February. In 2007, Perez had completed a 16-month mobilization, including a one-year tour to Iraq with the Puerto Rico National Guard.

Although Perez feared the worst before attending an Individual Ready Reserve muster here in March, he quickly discovered that he was not being recalled to serve his country for another combat tour.

Perez was not the only individual in attendance who was apprehensive. A few hands rose when the officer in charge of the IRR Muster Program for U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Lt. Col. Craig Smith, asked during his welcome if the Soldiers thought they had been summoned to Fort Buchanan for mobilization.

Concerns subsided when the Soldiers realized the intent of the muster was not to recall them to active duty but to provide helpful information and services for the attendees and to update personal information.

Smith told the Soldiers and family members that, if they had questions, the muster team and support staff owed them a response and he urged everyone not to leave before all questions were answered.

“One of our biggest challenges is ensuring that Soldiers understand this is a muster, not a mobilization,” Smith said. “We do not mobilize Soldiers at musters. We are here to ensure Soldiers are getting registered for the benefits they have earned. The VA, the Army, and other service organizations have more to offer than most Soldiers can even begin to realize. Musters are all about taking care of Soldiers.”

Several attendees raised their hands again when Brig. Gen. William D.R. “Razz” Waff, deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Human Resources Command, asked if they had deployed for Operations Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom; a few hands remained up when he asked if there were Soldiers who had deployed more than once or twice. He thanked everyone for their service and told the group, “Whatever decision you make (regarding your future), we want it to be an informed decision.”

U.S. Army Human Resources Command is reaching out to nearly 36,000 IRR Soldiers from January to August to complete an annual readiness check. The Army began mustering IRR Soldiers in 2007 to validate their readiness levels and to ensure they were prepared if called upon to support Overseas Contingency Operations.

A Soldier typically becomes a member of the IRR after successfully completing several years of active duty or selected

reserve membership. Soldiers may transfer to the IRR to fulfill the remainder of their contractual military service obligation, which is normally eight years.

“The muster program gives us the chance to collect required information from our IRR Soldiers, but it also gives them a chance to learn about the services and benefits available to them,” Smith said. “A lot of opportunities can open up for them through either more active IRR participation, membership in a reserve unit, or volunteering to mobilize in support of overseas contingency operations. We are giving the IRR Soldiers the tools to make an informed decision and help them determine what works for them.”

An annual requirement, mustering is a one-day event for which IRR Soldiers are paid about \$200. While many IRR Soldiers complete a Personnel Accountability Muster, a one-on-one visit with an Army reserve career counselor, several thousand Soldiers will gather at group events called Readiness Musters.

The number of Readiness Musters has increased each year from the initial four musters held in 2007 to eight in 2008 and 13 in 2009. Last year, U.S. Army Human Resources Command partnered with Veterans Affairs to hold five Readiness Musters at VA facilities, which proved such a successful venture that nine Readiness Musters will be held at VA facilities this year, with the remaining musters conducted on Army posts and Army Reserve centers.

In 2010, 19 Readiness Musters are being held at locations across the United States and – for the first time – outside the continental United States in Puerto Rico.

“The team is venturing outside the continental United States this year for the first time because we realized it was important to offer our services to those Soldiers as well,” Smith said. Future overseas musters are planned in the coming years.

Readiness Musters have not only increased in number but in scope and services offered, as the IRR Soldiers mustering at Fort Buchanan learned.

One of the first individuals to arrive here at the muster site was Johnny Dwiggs with the Armed Forces Employer Partnership – formerly called the Army Reserve Employer Partnership Initiative. Dwiggs said the organization partners with more than 900 public and private sector employers and attempts to match the needs of the employers with Soldiers in thousands of job opportunities.

“The Soldiers already have many of the skill sets the employers are looking for and already meet many of the job requirements,” Dwiggs said. “The partners are eager to hire the Soldiers because of their experience and qualifications.”

Spc. Maria Sepulveva was pleasantly surprised when she thought she would just be completing paperwork at the muster. “There were a lot of job opportunities that we were told about and how to go to the website to find out more,” she said. A former guardsman, Sepulveva was also excited to learn that IRR

Soldiers can go to schools, get promoted and volunteer for active duty tours.

“I would tell other IRR Soldiers in my situation that they should come to the muster with questions and find out about the benefits of being an IRR Soldier,” Sepulveva said.

Seventeen veteran support agencies attended the Puerto Rico muster to share information on their services and opportunities that could benefit the Soldiers and their families. U.S. Army Human Resources Command partnered with the 81st Regional Support Command and the 1st Mission Support Command to support the muster and coordinate the effort to bring these agencies to Fort Buchanan.

“Lt. Col. Gayle Scott and Sgt. 1st Class Beverly Robinson of the 81st Soldier Readiness Processing Team provided outstanding personnel support during the Puerto Rico muster,” said Maj. Gerald Bradford, Muster Team operations officer. “The 81st SRP team personnel were professional, and they catered to the needs of the IRR Soldiers. They also assisted IRR Soldiers’ family members who attended the muster by answering their questions and provided them with information that would be of help to them during the time their service member is serving in the IRR.”

Along with the 81st SRP team, Capt. Domingo Cartagena of the 1st MSC and Master Sgt. Madeline Santiago, area leader for Army Reserve Careers Division Region 5, assisted in coordinating with local agencies to send representatives to the muster and were a major reason that the event was a success, Bradford said.

“It has been awesome to help all of these Soldiers – to bring them together to find out all of the benefits that they can receive,” said Santiago, who is responsible for 11 career counselors in Puerto Rico. “Our goal was for all of the IRR Soldiers to make contact with the career counselors. I wanted the IRR Soldiers to know from the counselors all of the benefits that are out there for them.”

Santiago also echoed Bradford’s comments of the importance of the efforts of Scott and Robinson from the 81st RRC. “They were very helpful in organizing and setting up the event,” she said.

Army Reserve Career Counselor Sgt. 1st Class Gabriel Almodovar said many of the issues he dealt with were medical concerns of the Soldiers, and he ensured they received attention from the medical personnel at the muster. Many of the repeated comments he heard from the Soldiers included: “Nobody told me

I could have an ID card, or that I could get promoted, or that I could shop in the post exchange or commissary.”

The IRR Soldiers also learned about the benefits of transferring to the Selected Reserve, such as the opportunity to enroll in health, dental and life insurance plans. In the last three years, 7,195 IRRs transferred to the Selected Reserve through the IRR Muster Program.

Almodovar stressed how important it is for IRR Soldiers to keep their contact information up-to-date. “For someone to miss everything here today because we didn’t have a good address or phone number is too bad.”

Perez felt fortunate that he attended the muster following his medical screening. “The medical screening helped me learn that I had high blood pressure, and now I can get additional medical treatment and take care of it,” he said. The VA staff on site also

helped him register and learn more about benefits available such as home loans, he said.

Sgt. Johnny Quiles previously attended a one-on-one Personnel Accountability Muster with a career counselor and said the thought of being mobilized didn’t go through his mind when he was scheduled to attend the Readiness Muster here. One of the many benefits the former active duty Soldier and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran said he discovered at the muster was that, as an IRR Soldier, he remained eligible to use



Photo by Master Sgt. Brian Kappmeyer

Career Counselor Sgt. 1st Class Gabriel Almodovar with Army Reserve Careers Division Region 5 in Puerto Rico answers questions and discusses opportunities with Spc. Abimael Marrero.

the post exchange and commissary. Quiles’ military obligation ends next year, but as a husband and father of two girls, he said he plans to remain in the IRR because of his family.

The Army continues to evaluate and change the muster format to provide more services to the Soldiers and enhance the value of the experience. Smith says he would tell Soldiers unable to attend a muster that they are missing out on one of the best opportunities the Army has to offer.

“Mustering is a great return on investment for Soldiers. On top of the opportunity to enroll for VA health care, receiving opportunities for public and private sector jobs, and being connected with numerous veteran support agencies, Soldiers receive a \$200 stipend for completing muster duty,” Smith said.

IRR Soldiers seeking additional information about the muster program may contact the Muster Team at 877-303-2400.

For more information about U.S. Army Human Resources Command, visit www.hrc.army.mil. For more information about the Armed Forces Employer Partnership and to search for job opportunities, visit www.usar.army.mil and click on the Employer Partnership tab.