

# South Dakota National Guard

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

## **3 brothers, 2 war zones, 1 family deployed**

By Maj. Anthony Deiss  
SDNG Public Affairs Office

The expression, “When the National Guard mobilizes for war; it’s not just communities that deploy but also families,” has held true for three brothers in the South Dakota Army National Guard.

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Mullen, Staff Sgt. Kristian Mullen and Sgt. Erik Mullen are all currently serving overseas in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation New Dawn.

Michael and Erik are serving with the 200th Engineer Company in Afghanistan, and Kristian is serving with the 139th Brigade Support Battalion’s Logistics Task Force in Kuwait.

While all three brothers share a family history of deploying overseas – their father Patrick deployed to Germany during the Vietnam War – their call to serve is for different reasons.

“I wanted to serve my community and country,” said Kristian, 35, of Miller. “Deploying was never on my mind when I joined the National Guard, but I did understand that it was always a possibility.”

“I joined during the timeframe of the first Gulf War. I wanted to join to get help with school benefits and to serve,” said Michael, 39, of Pierre. “By putting on this uniform you have to plan on deploying.”

“Mike and Kris kept telling me that I needed to enlist when I was in high school,” said Erik, 30, of Madison. “However, for some reason, I never did until I graduated college.”

Kristian, who works full-time for Company A, 139th BSB in Miller as a truck driver, is performing duties in administration and customs for the 139th LTF in Kuwait.

Comprised of 64 Soldiers from the Brookings, Redfield, Watertown, Miller, Mitchell, Rapid City and Sioux Falls areas, the 139th LTF deployed in July with a mission to provide supply, maintenance and transportation support to Special Operations Command units in Iraq. The LTF served about five months there before the drawdown of U.S. forces in December. Now, they are assisting in retrograde operations, in Kuwait, for the remainder of their tour.

With 15 years of service in the military, five of which was on active duty with the U.S. Army, Kristian is not new to deployments. He deployed with Battery B, 1st Battalion 147th Field Artillery to Iraq in 2007.

“This deployment is very different from the Battery B tour in every way,” he said. “On my last deployment, we provided base security and convoy escort. On my current deployment, we are providing logistics support to Special Operations Command.”

Michael, who works full-time as an operations noncommissioned officer for the 200th Engineer Co., is also on his second tour, deploying with the 200th to Iraq in 2003. As the operations NCO for the unit, he is responsible for running the operations section and tracking its 180 Soldiers.

Deploying in May, the 200th is a multi-role bridging company whose mission is to maintain, repair and replace existing military bridges throughout Afghanistan. In South Dakota, Michael tracks the unit’s members and their activities between three locations; Pierre, Chamberlain and Mobridge. In Afghanistan, he has to track Soldiers and their operations in five regional commands throughout a country nearly the size of Texas.

“The support sections have been busy fixing and maintaining vehicles and the recon teams have been conducting inspections and looking at possible new bridge sites,” said Erik, a fire team leader and a bridge crew chief with the 200th. “While the bridge platoons have been building, deconstructing, and repairing all military bridges in theater.”

Despite having the tough mission of tracking Soldiers and maintaining operations, Michael said living conditions have improved quite a bit since his last deployment.

“During my last deployment, we pushed into Iraq and were on an undeveloped camp that had little life support. We lived on MRE’s (Meals, Ready to Eat) and took water-bottle showers,” said Michael. “Currently in Afghanistan, we are on a well-developed base that supplies us with all needed personal items and nice-to-have things.

“This deployment has been okay for the most part; however, the first deployment was by far a more rewarding experience,” continued the veteran with 20 years of service in the National Guard. “The most rewarding part was completing the full closure of a bridge in Iraq over the Tigris River in 2003.”

With nearly six years of service in the National Guard, Erik, a teacher with the Todd County school district, is on his first deployment, and said his deployment experience has had its times of fun and heartbreak.

“It has been challenging at times, both mentally and physically,” he said.

Although there are challenges, Erik feels as if he is making a difference in Afghanistan, and finds ways to cope with the stress.

“While at the bridge sites, we have had some Afghan National Army and Police helping with security, and that’s a promising sign,” said Erik. “The Afghanistan people use our bridges as much as we do. They depend on the bridges we build and maintain for their livelihood.

“During my downtime, I like to send emails to family and exercise,” continued Erik. “With my squad living in small quarters, there tends to be a lot of jokes played on one another.”

When asked to summarize their deployment experience in one word, each of the Mullen brothers had an intriguing, and yet similar, answer.

“Organized mayhem,” said Michael. “Dealing with multiple commands throughout the theater is a challenge.”

“Fluid,” said Kristian. “The one, real thing I have learned on this deployment is you must be fluid at all times. We have a quote here that sums it all up, ‘Standby to be prepared to do something that is yet to be determined.’”

“Challenging,” said Erik. “Working with all the U.S. Armed Forces made it a challenge. Even though we are in the military, we all speak different lingo.”

Even in a challenging environment, Michael and Erik still have the comfort of being near each another in Afghanistan.

“I speak with Erik on a daily basis when we are on Camp Leatherneck together,” said Michael. “We were fortunate to have Thanksgiving dinner together, along with going home on mid-tour leave at the same time.”

“It helps knowing that when I am not outside of the wire I can see Mike every day,” said Erik.

However, contact between them and Kristian is a bit more difficult.

“It’s a worry not knowing what they are doing,” said Kristian. “However, I did get to see them both when they were in route on leave and had to make a stop in Kuwait.”

While staying in contact with each other is not easy for the Mullen brothers, perhaps even more difficult is maintaining contact with their families back home.

“Being away from my wife and daughter has been a real challenge,” said Kristian, who left behind his wife, Rhona, and daughter, Kloe, 4. “It has been rough on them. My wife and I married on March 30, and I left in June. We enjoy motorcycling and are planning a trip for when I get home.”

“It has been difficult for them, since she is so far away from family and friends,” said Erik of his wife Danielle, and son, Parker, 22 months. “I can’t wait to hold my family and spend time with them.”

“It’s been challenging being away from my family,” said Michael of his wife, Lori, and three children, Tyson, 20, Jory, 15, and Jayd, 14. “It’s hard, but my kids are older and understand the complexity of the mission at hand. I would like to be eating at Cattleman’s Club in Pierre or Ricks Café in Mobridge with Lori and the kids, right now.”

Despite the difficulties of serving overseas, the Mullen brothers said growing up together has helped them cope with the stresses of war.

“Tough love – war between brothers was not uncommon, and I think it makes you stronger as a family,” said Michael.

“The tough love we had between each other growing up – we liked to fight a lot, but it all made us stronger,” said Erik.

With love for their country, each other and their families, the Mullen brothers are ensuring the tradition of the National Guard’s strong family roots take hold for generations to come.

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Sgt. 1st Class Michael Mullen and Sgt. Erik Mullen pose for a picture while serving on deployment in Afghanistan. Michael and Erik, along with their brother Kristian, staff sergeant, who was deployed to Iraq and now in Kuwait, are all serving their country overseas. (Courtesy photo) (RELEASED)



Staff Sgt. Kristian Mullen. (Courtesy photo) (RELEASED)

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