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Georgia's unpaid Defense Force takes on emergencies

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Pat Holman's bum eye did him in.

Every time the Marietta middle school teacher knocked on the U.S. military's door, recruiters gave him the same song and dance: It's your eye, Pat.

Holman has been legally blind in his right eye since birth. Poor vision stood like a stone-faced nightclub bouncer in the way of what he wanted most: to join the military.

Until he found the Georgia State Defense Force — a little-known, all-voluntary military group that operates under the state's Department of Defense.

Defense force officers wear military uniforms, but they have to pay for them, as well as their travel expenses. They also don't carry guns.

Much like military reservists, they work once a month but are called upon by the commander of the Department of Defense for special assignments. They search for missing people, provide crowd control at public events and help when disaster strikes, among other duties.

The defense force has slightly less than 1,000 members — including radio consumer guru Clark Howard — assigned to five brigades throughout the state, in Macon, Columbus, Savannah, Fitzgerald and its headquarters city of Atlanta.

Its yearly budget is \$75,000, compared to just under \$6 million in state money and \$254.7 million in federal money for the combined budgets of the Georgia Air and Army national guards, according to Jim Driscoll, spokesman for the state Department of Defense, which oversees all three agencies.

More than 100 defense force volunteers unloaded and took care of injured Hurricane Katrina evacuees who were transported from New Orleans to Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Marietta. They swarmed southeast Georgia earlier this year, providing 9,000 man-hours of medical support and traffic control, when a massive wildfire took center stage.

Force kicks in

The force's numbers doubled after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but it was the volunteers' work with Katrina victims — the Georgia Army National Guard was deployed in Iraq at the time — that brought attention.

"That was what really put us on the map," Defense Force Capt. Eddie Williams said.

About 25 states have defense force groups, Williams said. Georgia's has been operating on and off under different names since 1940 but traces its roots to state militias formed in the Colonial days.

Holman grew up near an Army base in Alabama. In his family, joining the military was like eating or sleeping: Everybody does it.

"All my family — all the way back to the beginning of the country," Holman said. "Uncles, cousins, aunts, everybody."

Holman wanted no different, though he knew his eye could be a problem.

He tried anyway — the Air Force first, then the Army. A few years ago, he made a final stab at it with the Navy. No dice.

Then he learned of the defense force from a pal who is a Cobb County police detective.

For once, the eye couldn't hold him back. The defense force's physical requirements aren't as tough as the U.S. military's. He joined in the summer of 2006 and typically works one day each month as a recruiter.

"It's a real proud thing to put on that uniform," Holman said. "No doubt about that."

Others already have had the combat uniform on their backs; about 40 percent of the volunteers served in the U.S. armed forces.

'Gets in your blood'

Alan Baker, 38, for example, went into the Air Force to pay for college and wound up staying almost 20 years.

"It turned out I was good at it," said Baker, who works as a security guard at a federal building in downtown Atlanta. "I just kept on going."

He served in Desert Storm in the early 1990s. In 2005, while serving in Iraq, a vehicle he was riding in on a downtown Baghdad street got blasted by an improvised explosive device, and he was injured.

A divorce led Baker to Newnan, where he now lives. A year ago, he checked the Internet to see if Georgia had a defense team similar to one in his former home state of Tennessee.

"Being in uniform gets in your blood," Baker said. "It's a camaraderie-type thing."

Baker, too, has been working as a recruiter and soon will get training in search-and-rescue missions like one in which defense force members participated earlier this year in southwest Atlanta.

A local woman had gone missing under suspicious circumstances. The defense force was called in to join a search party. Eighty volunteers came from as far as Rome to pitch in.

They combed a county park for two weekends. The searchers didn't find the woman, but they did

discover another body with a shotgun — an apparent suicide.

Without closure, they returned to their homes, paying for their own gas on the way.

THE ROOTS OF THE FORCE

- **18th century:** Gen. James Edward Oglethorpe of Great Britain trains Georgia colonists in militia tactics. Georgia militiamen later serve under Gen. George Washington during the American Revolution.
- **19th century:** Georgia militia contributes troops to the Confederate war effort. The militia disbands after the Union victory.
- **1940:** Gov. E.D. Rivers organizes the Georgia State Defense Corps, a group of unpaid, voluntary Georgia residents much like the militia.
- **1941:** Gov. Eugene Talmadge changes the name to State Defense Corps of Georgia.
- **1942:** State Legislature changes the group's name to the Georgia State Guard.
- **1947:** The Georgia State Guard is disbanded after the end of World War II.
- **1973:** The Georgia State Guard is reauthorized in name only.
- **1985:** The Georgia State Guard is activated. Its name is changed to the Georgia State Defense Force because its old name was too similar to the Georgia National Guard.

Source: Maj. Rich Elwell, Georgia State Defense Force historian

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