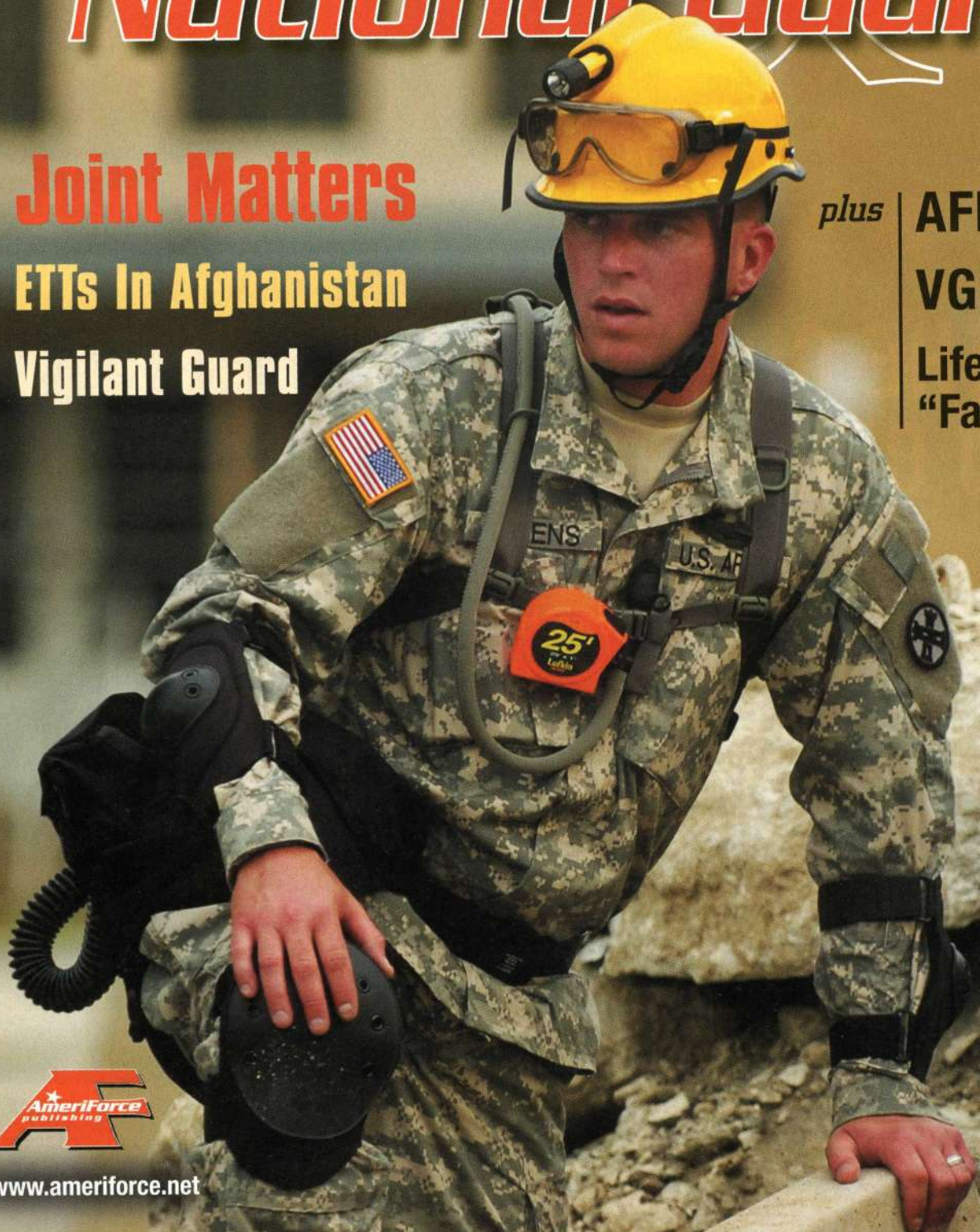


The Reserve National Guard

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Sergeant Heith Dokken: Another Rocket Scientist

Text & Photo by Paul Avallone

In a rural FOB in the mountains of the northeast, I sat down outside the MWR connex to wait my turn for one of the two Internet computers, and the friendly guy waiting ahead of me introduced himself. "I'm Heith Dokken, North Dakota National Guard," he held out his hand. "What's a civilian doing up here?" I told him I'm a writer, former Guard Special Forces and mentioned my publication, and he said he remembered and was still amazed by an article a couple of years back about a National Guard Special Forces guy in Afghanistan who was also as a civilian a rocket scientist. That was Captain Jim, I told him; and it was I who had written the article. An instant friendship was struck up.

There is a good reason that Dokken remembered Captain Jim; a highly educated scientist/National Guardsman himself, he's a lot like Jim—with both he and Jim serving in the Guard not for the money, but for the duty, camaraderie and adventure. One slight difference: Jim worked at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California and commuted to his Guard unit in Alabama, while Dokken remains in state in North Dakota, commuting from his home and job in Grand Forks to the unit in Bismarck.

Dokken grew up listening to his uncles' stories about Vietnam. As an Army Ranger, one had done four tours. Another, USMC Force Recon, had done three. Himself a very good baseball player in high school, Dokken was expected by family and friends to pursue that in college, but even so young he realized, he says now, "I don't think I could appreciate things in life that much if I were a professional athlete." Graduating high school at 17, Dokken wanted to go Ranger, but his parents would not sign for him to enlist in the Army. They would for the Navy, though, for Dokken to be a field corpsman in the Fleet Marines, which he looked at as a backdoor way to go SEAL. Once in, though, Dokken learned that the SEALs were closed to him because of his color blindness.

He was one of seven of a starting class of 104 to graduate as a radiation health technician in the Navy's nuclear weapons propulsion program, then he got stuck in the job as an E4, with no chance of promotion. His ETS coming up, it was 1994, and he was offered a \$25,000 bonus to remain in the MOS, with no option to do what he wanted, which was to transfer to the Marine Corps as a ground-pounder. "I told them," he says, "you're going to lose me to the Marines or lose me to the civilian world,



but I'm leaving." The Navy held fast. So did he, returning to North Dakota, entering college and joining the local Guard unit, the 188th Air Defense Artillery.

Along the college avenue, Dokken has earned a master's in Geographical Information Systems and Satellite Imagery—he is a research scientist at the University of North Dakota's Energy and Environmental Research Center. Guard-wise, in 10 years he has only advanced one rank, to E5, but that has been by choice. He has turned down promotions because, with his civilian job as well as the doctorate he is pursuing, he feels that he could not give the extra time to the Guard that is necessary to effectively fill senior positions. His own commanders have urged him to go to OCS, but in a funny irony, he prefers teaching OCS.

Dokken's Navy and Army time have taken him to 48 states and 48 different countries. "Afghanistan was 47," he says, "then we were up on the Pakistan border, so I stepped across, and that's 48." Before going to Afghanistan in March 2006 with his air defense unit that was retrained and refitted as an MP battalion for the deployment, Dokken had volunteered and served with a North Dakota Guard engineer unit for a tour of Iraq.

As Dokken finishes telling me about his experiences in Afghanistan with the North Dakota Guard, a thought came to mind: I wonder if in a couple of years from now, a reader of the *Reserve and Guard Magazine* will say, "Hey, I remember a story about a Guard guy map imagery scientist from North Dakota." And who knows what that soldier's own particular story will be...