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A Brief History of the Virgin Islands National Guard (Rev. 10 SEP 2011)

Against the backdrop of a turquoise and sapphire Caribbean Sea, the Virgin Islands National Guard was federally recognized on October 19, 1973. Major General LaVern Webber, director of the United States Army National Guard, was the principal speaker at the waterfront ceremony held in Christiansted, St. Croix.

Major Leayle Galiber was appointed acting adjutant general and took command of the first two units to be activated, a Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment and the 661st Military Police Company, both on St. Croix. Some 113 Soldiers were the original charter members.

For two years prior to that event, many people worked long hours to organize and fulfill the necessary requirements before they could achieved their goal of federal recognition. An act of congress, sponsored by Ron de Lugo, the territory's first delegate to congress, officially created the Virgin Islands National Guard.

Military service was not new to Virgin Islanders as its history notes. They had served in WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Earlier in its history were citizen soldiers like the Caribs, those of the slave inhabitants and under the various five flags before those of Denmark and the United States. There was a Militia Corp in the Danish West Indies. By an ordinance in 1907, the Militia Corp was established on St. Croix.

When the U.S. Navy pulled out of the region and left behind its infrastructure of facilities, it provided the opportunity for a home-grown military force. The nucleus of the newly formed Guard unit consisted of former members of the United States Army Reserve. In February 1974, the 662nd Military Police Company was organized on St. Thomas. The 666th Army Band, consisting of one warrant officer and three enlisted personnel, was established on neighboring St. Croix in October. The first federally recognized adjutant general, Colonel Gerard Luz James, began serving in July 1974, and served for nearly two years.

The Virgin Islands National Guard received its first call to territorial active duty from then Governor Melvin H. Evans in November 1974, when torrential rains resulted in widespread flooding throughout the islands. By September 1976, the Army Guard strength had doubled and the first reorganization occurred. The Guard expanded on St. Thomas with the addition of the 666th Army Band and the 666th Military Police Battalion. All elements of the newly structured combat service support organization were subordinate to the Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment. In 1977, troops from the Virgin Islands National Guard operated the local prison during the correction officers' strike.

A second major reorganization occurred in August 1978, with the addition of a heavy equipment maintenance company and a signal support activity company. With an increase of 150% in aggregate strength, command and control of the Army Guard was placed at battalion level.

While training to perform its federal mission has been its number one priority, the Virgin Islands National Guard has not neglected its territorial mission. Rescue and evacuation, communication, medical, engineering and security skills have been honed to aid the civilian populace during hurricanes, government strikes, fires, and threats of violence. During the elections in October and November 1980, threats of violence prompted the Guard to join local police in providing increased surveillance and security. Also that year, the Guard provided communications, lighting, and medical support when the cruise ship *Angelina Laura* caught fire at the West Indies dock on St Thomas.

On May 7, 1980, the Virgin Islands National Guard added another Component to its fold. The 285th Combat Communication Flight Air National Guard unit, with an authorized strength of one officer and 21 enlisted, was activated on the island of St. Croix. The charter members were Commander First Lieutenant John V. Watley along with Lionel Edwards, Mabel Cornelius, Lawrence Hendricks, Florencio Ortiz, Jr. and Lowell Thomas, Sr. After Hurricane Hugo destroyed St. Croix in 1989, this unit provided the only official means of communication outside of ham radio operators. The 285th proved their relevance in 1995 after St. Thomas was devastated by Hurricane Marilyn. They provided communications support to the Governor's Emergency Operations Center.

Professional leadership training began in 1981. The first class of the Virgin Islands National Guard officer candidates graduated from the Florida Military Academy at Camp Blanding, Florida, in July 1981.

The Virgin Islands Military Academy (VIMA) was established in the fall of 1981. It graduated 19 second lieutenants from the intensive program before the officer program was discontinued. To beef up the officer corps, a Direct Appointment Officer Orientation course was held at College of the Virgin Islands on St. Thomas in January 1982. Some 22 officers, from warrant officer to lieutenant colonel, successfully completed the course.

The VIMA Non-Commissioned Officer Program has remained vibrant for thirty years. It has successfully conducted the Basic Non-Commissioned Officer, Advance Non-Commissioned Officer, Warrant Officer Basic, Small Group Instructor, Total Army Instructor, Army Basic Instructor and Combat Lifesaver courses since it was instituted in 1981, and is now known as the 210th Regiment, Regional Training Institute at Hamms Bluff, St. Croix.

On April 1, 1984, reorganization placed all military police units under the command of the 666th Military Police Battalion. The remainder of the combat service support units was placed under a troop command.

On October 16, 1985, Major General Ernest R. Morgan, the Adjutant General, became the first Major General in the history of the Virgin Islands National Guard. In October 1987, the Virgin Islands National Guard welcomed Major General Robert L. Moorhead as adjutant general, a native son.

The VING and the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Officer (VITEMA) were merged by Executive Order No. 304-1987. It also established the Office of the Adjutant General (OTAG) as its management entity to coordinate territorial response to emergencies and disasters. That marriage changed in July 2009. Governor John P. de Jongh, Jr. signed legislation that separated the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency from the Office of the Adjutant General and VING through Act 7074 called the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Act of 2009.

The Guard deactivated its 666th Military Police Battalion in September 1989, and activated the 786th Service and Support Battalion. The reorganization also deactivated the 662nd Military Police Company and changed the mission of the 661st Military Police Company from a prisoner of war and physical security guard company to a more versatile corps-support military police unit. Additionally, the reorganization restructured the command and returned control of all units to their respective island commands.

On the home front, the Virgin Islands community has seen the Guard performing its combat service support skills during recovery operations associated with the many hurricanes that have blasted the region in the last 22 years. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo was one of the most devastating hurricanes to hit the islands. Hurricanes Luis and Marilyn (1995), Bertha and Hortense (1996), Georges (1998), Lenny (1999) and Omar (2008) also hit the Virgin Islands. The Guard lived up to their Motto, "Always Ready, Always There."

While Hurricane Hugo damaged and delayed work on the Guard's first training facility, it was eventually completed in 1991 in Estate Bethlehem, and named the LTC Lionel Jackson Armory. A second facility on St. Thomas, the SFC Leonard B. Francis Armory in Estate Nazareth, soon followed in 1992.

The 23rd Civil Support Detachment was activated during FY 1999 and grew in manning to become the 23rd Weapons of Mass Destruction – Civil Support Team (WMD-CST). The CST reorganized to augment local and regional terrorism response. The unit received federal certification June 2009. Three unit personnel are recipients of the Military Emergency Management Specialist (MEMS) Badge from the State Guard Association of the United States.

In December 1996, Major General Jean A. Romney became the first major general to have risen from the ranks to command the Virgin Islands National Guard. He passed away June 30, 2000. On December 1, 2008, the 27th Legislature of the Virgin Islands passed Bill No. 27-0269 honoring Major General Romney for his contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands. The VING held an official dedication ceremony on May 24, 2010 for the Major General Jean A. Romney Memorial Drive at the Estate Bethlehem military facility on St. Croix.

The Virgin Islands National Guard held a groundbreaking ceremony for its new Regional Training Institute August 11, 2010 at the 40-acre Estate Bethlehem Military Complex on St. Croix. The construction project consists of a two-story building approximately 42,556 square feet that includes classroom and education space, offices, a dining facility with a kitchen and a two-story dormitory.

Major General Renaldo Rivera, a proud Vietnam veteran, is the current adjutant general, leading a force of almost 1,000 men and women who are ready at a moment's notice to answer the call to duty.

The Virgin Islands National Guard has been called out on many occasions to perform both its federal and territorial missions. The 113th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment was the first VING unit activated for a federal deployment mission in 1995. Stationed on St. Croix, the unit, as a joint element with the Puerto Rico National Guard, mobilized to Bosnia in support of Operation Joint Endeavor.

The total deployments in support of federal missions from 2001-2010 are:

1. Virgin Islands Army National Guard: 664 Soldiers
- Three Army units are preparing to deploy before end of Training

Year 2011. They are the 104th RAID, 610th QM CO and Detachment 2/D-126th Aviation Company. A new unit, the 1947th Contracting Team, is training for mobilization by TY-2014.

2. Virgin Islands Air National Guard: 21 Airmen

- Seven ANG personnel are scheduled to deploy by October 2011.

V.I. Guardsmen take great pride in their service to the “flag”, but greater pride is apparent when the community. Guardsmen have volunteered in the Funeral Honors Program for over ten years. Presently, there are 35 volunteers. They provide pallbearers, firing party and a bugler for those entitled to military honors. One of their most solemn experiences was the ceremonies for two fallen VING service members killed in Iraq January 2007. They are Lieutenant Colonel David Canegata III and Sergeant First Class Floyd Lake, Sr. They performed honors for 49 in 2010. During TY-2011, they supported 57 funerals by August 2011.

In the area of domestic operations, ongoing participation in drug interdiction activity, support to the islands’ youth, and other community support activities have made the members of the Virgin Islands National Guard a familiar sight within the Caribbean region. Outside of the territory, VING has deployed assets in support of historical missions like the Southwest Border, Hurricane Katrina, September 2001 Security and Haiti earthquake.

VING has had five medical elements in its history to include an ambulance and a dispensary detachment. In 2010, the Guard was awarded for ten years of preventative health support to CAREFORCE, a medical outreach to the senior citizen population of the territory lead by the Virgin Islands Medical Institute. They also supported humanitarian missions and MEDRETEs for over ten years worldwide.

A critical component of the deployment cycle is the VING’s vibrant and longstanding Family Program Office and its army of volunteers in Family Readiness Groups. They are supported by non-profits and civic groups like ESGR, American Legion, Adopt-A-Soldier, Rotary, V.I. Missions, Inc. the Red Cross, V.I. Veterans Affairs, schools, churches and businesses.

Over the past 38 years, the V. I. National Guard has grown from its humble beginnings in a warehouse at Vitracco Mall on St. Croix. Title 23 Chapter 19 of the Virgin Islands Code still serves as the legal framework of its organization and operations. VING has acquired many permanent facilities and is poised to break ground on a Joint Forces Headquarters in Estate Bethlehem in TY-2012.

The evolution and continual growth of the Virgin Islands National Guard represent's the territory's commitment to service, support and protection of its four gems; St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island. Its strategic aim is to remain relevant, responsive and reliable.

Guardians of the Eastern Front - Four Islands, One Guard!