

Sgt. Ben Cook got a farewell hug from daughter Gracelyn this past May when the 200th Engineer Company of the South Dakota National Guard was activated. Destination is a year-long deployment with Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan. This is the third time Sgt. Cook has been deployed overseas. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Theanne Tangen, South Dakota National Guard.)



Getting along without mom or dad during two weeks of summer Guard camp is one thing. But when it comes to their expectations for active duty, many post-9/11 service personnel and their families got more than they bargained for.

The past ten years have seen our country's longest period of prolonged conflict. Unlike previous wars, battles in Iraq and Afghanistan have been fought by an all-volunteer military whose numbers have been reinforced by reserve and National Guard units. In South Dakota alone, 6000 Air and Army Guard personnel have been deployed to combat and rigorous training programs many of them multiple times.

For those service personnel who return to civilian life instead of remaining on active duty, re-entry challenges are especially strong. Their communities, coworkers, families, and friends have inevitably grown and changed, and they've been changed by experiences that are not easily shared.

Watertown Community Foundation aims to find ways to ease the path to re-entry. On 31 May, Watertown Community Foundation will convene "Coming Together: Expanding the Sea of Goodwill in Post-9/11 America."

"We want to encourage communication and networking among the public, nonprofit, and government entities that provide support to service personnel and their families." "Ultimately, we hope to lower the barriers returning personnel face and improve the quality of life for them and their families."

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael McMullen coined the phrase "Sea of Goodwill" to describe the resources and support currently available to returning military personnel resources such as the Royal C. Johnson Veterans Memorial Hospital in Sioux Falls, its outreach program, service center, and new homeless veterans' campaign, and the many veterans' service organizations based here in Watertown.

"Our goal is to get the general public on board and expand that Sea of Goodwill, especially in the areas of education, employment, and healthcare," Tidwell says. "We hope to build on the support our community naturally feels for returning personnel and their families and take it to new levels."

As to the need for the gathering, Tidwell points to a study the Pew Research Center released this past October that illustrates the gaps in understanding between civilians and the military. "War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era" is based on surveys of more than 1800 military personnel and

2003 American adults. The report analyzes the differences in attitude between pre- and post-9/11 veterans and the general public. The authors report that only .5% of the American public has been on active duty over the past ten years. With so few bearing the burden of war, it's not unexpected that over 80% of service personnel believe that the public doesn't understand the problems they face and that just over 70% of the public agrees.

“Coming Together: Expanding the Sea of Goodwill in Post-9/11 America,” will be held May 31, 4 p.m., at the Watertown Police Department Community Room. Please RSVP to the Watertown Community Foundation

“There's no charge to attend,” says Tidwell. “We want everyone who cares about our service personnel and their families to be there. It's time for us to come together and see what we can do to help.”