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Spc. Ashley Rodriguez From Yonkers worked in the New York City Medical Examiner's office during the pandemic

Yonkers Soldier Reflects On Service With THE NYC Medical Examiner's Office

By BRIAN HARROD

NEW YORK A Yonkers resident and New York Army National Guard Signal Soldier reflected on her unlikely service in the state's pandemic response as she found herself working with the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner during the city's darkest days of COVID-19.

Spc. Ashley Rodriguez is normally a Cable Systems Installer, assigned to Bravo Company, 101st Expeditionary Signal Battalion. Her role supporting the City of New York Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) would be anything but a traditional military skill.

The New York National Guard assistance with the recovery of the deceased in New York City is considered one of the most difficult missions for the Guard during COVID-19, said Maj. Gen. Michel Natali, the assistant Adjutant General for New York and former dual status commander for response forces assisting the city.

As a result of a sharp increase in deaths that overwhelmed the OCME, more than 300 Soldiers and Airmen from the New York National Guard were assigned to support the recovery and processing of remains across the city from April to June.

To highlight the dramatic need for assistance, New York City Commissioner of Health Dr. Oxiris Barbot told the New York Times April 14, that 3,000 more people died in the city between March 11 and April 13 than would normally have been expected during the same timeframe in an ordinary year.

Rodriguez was not even initially aware of the mortuary support mission and said she wasn't sure what to

expect going into it.

Aspiring to a civilian career in forensics, however, Rodriguez saw the mission as an opportunity to get exposure to the field and see if it was something that she could handle. So she quickly volunteered for duties on April 1.

By April 15, the New York City Department of Health announced that there had been 6,840 confirmed deaths out of 111,424 reported coronavirus cases.

In the first two weeks of her New York National Guard mission, the daily toll from COVID-19 rose from 378 deaths on April 1 to 651 deaths on April 15 before dropping back to 429 on May 1. City officials would report some 23,680 deaths before New York could reopen after flattening its curve in the summer.

"I'm a signal Soldier, not a mortuary assistant," Rodriguez said. "In the beginning, it was a scary experience."

For Rodriguez, she learned that she could handle the work.

They supported in-home recovery of decedents, transfer of decedents from hospitals, operation of a long-term storage facility in Brooklyn, and many other mortuary related tasks.

Deaths in New York City in that mission timeframe started at a peak of almost 500 each day, according to the city Department of Health, and only began to decrease in late April.

The Guardsmen and women were joined by an active Army mortuary affairs element, the 54th Quartermaster Company, who assisted the Medical Examiner's office with processing hundreds of remains.

Rodriguez and her team worked 12-hour shifts, recovering the deceased from a variety of causes, including drug overdoses, suicides and natural causes both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19.

She saw victims from all walks of life, from all across New York City, Rodriguez said, providing dignity and respect to the recovery of every decedent.

The grim nature of this mission, and the sheer volume of work needed, raised concerns among Guard leadership for the resiliency of the task force Soldiers, explained Command Sgt. Maj. David Piwowarski, the New York Army National Guard Senior Enlisted Advisor.

"Many of us have been to combat," Piwowarski said, "but this particular mission is very different, with handling human remains, every day, with long days, for weeks on end. I

expected that some service members would not want to be involved in this rather grim duty. What we found was quite the opposite."

"The first few days it was really hard for me, but I felt I had to be resilient," Rodriguez said. "The experience definitely showed me I could handle a lot more than I thought I could."

She also described an additional sense of accomplishment and pride that came from the appreciation of the families of those who had died and were recovered by National Guard members.

At first there was fear or confusion about why the military was there, Rodriguez said. Once family members understood we were there to take care of their loved one, they became very appreciative and knew we were going to give their loved one dignity and respect, she said.

Two months into her duties, Rodriguez experienced a low point when a realization that recovering deceased infants would also be a part of the mission and credits her team with helping her cope and get through that difficult time.

"We essentially came together and agreed we needed to be here for each other and we came up with a coping mechanism," Rodriguez said. "If it wasn't for them, I probably would've requested to be taken off the mission."

Rodriguez completed her duty July 21, one of the longest stretches by a Guard member. During that

time, her five-year-old daughter and her grandmother, a city hospital employee, each contracted COVID-19.

While they recovered, they continued to give their support to Rodriguez while she carried on with her OCME mission.

When her part in the mission came to an end, another phase began, a unique effort put in place by the New York National Guard leadership and staff to help address the transition and mental toll on members coming off their grim duties.

"We did a demobilization that lasted five days and focused on mental health," Rodriguez said. "They wanted to ensure that everybody knew that it was okay to not be okay and make sure that anyone who needs it, gets treatment."

Rodriguez enlisted in 2016 and said she plans to be in the National Guard for 20 years. Her experiences so far, especially during Operation COVID-19, have given her a new perspective on her service.

"I understood that as a Guardsman you come in wherever there's something that's needed and you fill a role," said Rodriguez. "The Guard does a lot more than you'd expect."

Specialist Ashley Rodriguez's story will be part of an address by General Daniel R. Hokanson, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, to the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) on Saturday, August 29, 2020.