

“The patriot volunteer,” Thomas Jackson wrote, “makes the most reliable soldier on earth.”

That being the case, the Mississippi National Guard is made up of reliable soldiers. The men and women of the Guard, our citizen soldiers, serve our state and our nation in ways many of us never realize.

It has been a busy year for the Guard. In early September of last year, members of the 155th Task Force Rifles finished their training and deployed to Bosnia as part of a peace-keeping mission.

They served their tour with distinction, and I had the privilege of visiting them right before Christmas.

It was an honor to be there with them and see first-hand the sacrifices they were making for their country, away from family and friends during the holiday season.

Right after the Task Force Rifles shipped out, we were hit with the attacks of September 11. Again, the men and women of the Guard were called to action – serving as security in our airports and hundreds were deployed across the globe in support of the war on terrorism. They are still serving – and we must remember them in our prayers.

The Mississippi Army National Guard is 9,700 soldiers strong, 415 more than it had in July of 2000 when Adjutant General James H. Lipscomb III took command. For the second year running, the strength of the Air National Guard stands at 102 percent of its authorized strength. Our Guard personnel are working together to make the Guard in Mississippi stronger than at anytime in recent history.

This is good for Mississippi.

Across the state, these soldiers carry out duties ranging from military police to aircraft refueling to special operations. They also respond to emergencies here at home, as evidenced by their work in rescuing flood victims during the recent storms that hit the Gulf Coast.

The duties of the Guard grew again this past week, with the announcement of the newest unit of the Mississippi Army National Guard. The 1687th Transportation Company is locating in Southaven, where it will play an integral role in the movement of Guard units and material, transporting cargo, and supplies to support forward area units.

The economic impact of this unit will be strong. Initially three full-time employees will serve here, and the unit will have strength of 166 soldiers, both men and women, with an annual payroll of nearly \$675,000.

The Desoto County and Memphis areas are well known for their commerce, particularly ground transportation moving along the I-55 corridor. With 60 brand-new semi-trucks and 120 flatbed trailers, the personnel serving in this unit will gain tremendous skills that can be applied in the civilian sector in this area.

There's a reason the soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard are among the first called up by our nation in times of need. Whether it's providing ground transportation or serving on the front lines in the war against terrorism, the reliable soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard are setting the standard.