

FC Citizen-Soldier Kyle Johnson Aids Agriculture Half a World Away



FC-RSM Kirk Johnson, his wife Holly, daughter Kara, and son Kyle pose with Captain Peter Shinn at Camp Dodge where Specialist Kyle Johnson of the Iowa National Guards 734th Agri Business Development Team prepares to deploy to Afghanistan.

FC's Kyle Johnson is a 22-year-old citizen soldier. Kyle works in the Agronomy department at FC's Perry location, where he sought employment after returning from his first tour of duty in Iraq in November of 2008. Kyle has recently volunteered for a special mission as a member of the Iowa National Guard's 734th Agri-business Development Team (ADT). He is a member of the Army National Guard and served in Iraq with the 186 MP Company stationed at a detainee facility south of Baghdad.

Kyle will be deployed again in July to Kunar Province in Afghanistan, where the ADT will work to expand legal agribusiness,

services, markets and Ag education to reduce poverty, create jobs and build the capacity of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Kyle will be part of the security force for the ADT, in this unique and historical mission helping to improve agri-business half a world away.

The ADT is comprised of a diverse team of soldiers who have a common baseline understanding of agriculture that will improve their functionality as a team when they are on the ground in northeastern Afghanistan. Their backgrounds include training in crops and soils, animal husbandry, small scale poultry production, and vegetable production and handling.

"This is the type of mission that only the National Guard could accomplish," says Captain Peter Shinn. "It's really a counterinsurgency mission. The thinking is that if we can secure the food production and sustainability, we can subsequently assist with national stability and security. We've heard presentations suggesting forty percent of the Afghanistan population is malnourished, and on average, most rural Afghans earn less than a dollar a day. Their average life expectancy is 44 years. If we can help them improve their ag production sustainably, it will be a marked improvement in their quality and way of life, and will reduce the appeal of insurgent groups."

To accomplish this, the ADT will work with provincial agricultural and governmental officials, as well as local elders to help them rebuild their agricultural infrastructure, rebuild irrigation systems and increase capacity of their agricultural systems. For their part, nearly every individual on the ADT has a background in agriculture, although those backgrounds are varied.

ISU has gotten involved offering training and will continue to support the team during their time in Afghanistan with a reach-back component. The team will have ISU research and extension experts to consult as they set up demonstration plots and engage early adopters to implement new farming techniques in Afghanistan. They have established and will maintain a website of resources for the team and have saved all the training materials to DVD so they have a reference at hand when they are in the field without internet connections.

"Keeping in touch is extremely important – not only with our resources, but with our families back home," says Kyle. "When we're away we have access to pay phones, internet, email, MSN messenger and even Skype. Technology has enabled us to be a new kind of soldier in so many important ways; I think a lot of people forget about how much it has meant in terms of having a communication link to home. Having everyone behind us means a lot and being able to keep in touch with them means everything," he says.

Kyle's team will replace a similar team from California who has been in the area for a year. When they arrive in Afghanistan later this summer, the ADT will face the needs of an agrarian area that their leader predicts will resemble Biblical times in terms of limited technology and small-plot farming. The ADT is counting on the common understanding of agricultural principles to make it possible for them to accomplish the tasks that they are charged with.

Follow Kyle's Iowa ADT team on Facebook at www.facebook.com/IOWAADT. We also hope to have updates in our newsletters from Kyle over the upcoming year. FC is proud of our military employees and would like to extend our continued support to Kyle, Kirk, Holly and Kara and to the ADT team in their mission.

On the personal side

Kyle is originally from Lytton, IA and joined the Army National Guard between his junior and senior year in high school. He was 20 years old when he shipped out to Iraq. When asked why he joined the Guard, Kyle says, "My Grandpa Gerald Krefl was in the Navy and I had a lot of respect for him. I thought it would be an honor to serve. I still wanted to work and go to school, but I had the desire to be a part of something meaningful. The National Guard seemed like the perfect fit."

Kyle's dad, Kirk Johnson is a Regional Sales Manager with FC. "The National Guard has been good for Kyle and FC has been so supportive of Kyle's role as a soldier. It's worked out really well. We're very proud of him," says Johnson of his son.

Kyle breaks out in a grin and gives his dad a hard time, "It's been good for mom and dad, too," he says. "Get's me out of their hair for a year at a time AND pays for school."

Kyle's mom, Holly and sister, Kara, are a bit teary eyed but optimistic. "It's hard to see him go, but what he's doing is important and we are so very proud of him," says mother, Holly Johnson.

"This mission is so much more public than the last one. My family has so much more information. What hasn't changed is the support. My family, friends and the people I work with are 110% supportive of what I do. None of us could do what we do without that," says Kyle.



FC's Kirk & Kyle Johnson