

Retiring White Bear Lake soldier fostered cooperation, not combat

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June 6, 2014 - Col. Eric Ahlness, who retires from the Minnesota Army National Guard at the end of June, has been a military man for 28 years. He has been deployed to Afghanistan and Bosnia, but the highlights of his career have had nothing to do with combat.

Rather, Ahlness has worked for agricultural improvements and community cooperation, with the idea that people with a reliable food supply, successful businesses and good relationships with neighbors are likely to create a more stable country.

This took a light touch, including the willingness to understand people's long-standing points of view.

"Forcing someone to do something doesn't have the lasting impact of convincing someone to do something -- or having them come to it on their own," he said.

Now, the skills he learned in his military career will be put to use in civilian life, as the leader for diversity in North America for Cargill.

When Ahlness was serving in Bosnia in 2003-2004, Bosniaks and Serbs had an uneasy post-war relationship. To encourage them to trust one another, Ahlness and his staff introduced the idea of a fire department that incorporated members from both backgrounds.

"People would see Serbians coming to Bosniak houses and putting their lives on the line to save people," he said.

When Ahlness was in Afghanistan in 2012, he led an agribusiness development team that included a dozen military people hand-picked for their civilian knowledge in areas such as soil and irrigation -- even beekeeping. Encouraging the Afghan farmers to accept the experts' advice about growing pomegranates, almonds and apricots required cultural awareness and sensitivity, Ahlness said.

Ahlness, 50, lives in White Bear Lake with his wife, Lori Ahlness, a retired military officer who has served in the Marine Corps Reserve and the Minnesota Army National Guard. The couple has one daughter, Ellen, 18, a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I wanted to be in the Army," Ahlness said. He grew up in Windom, Minn., and attended Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he earned a bachelor's degree in history and geography and a master's degree in political science. He received a second master's degree from the U.S. Army War College and was a Humphrey Fellow at the University of Minnesota.

His education and military experience gave him sterling credentials when he began to consider a civilian job, said Mike Etzel, sales vice president of Cargill, the global agribusiness company headquartered in Wayzata, Minn.

Etzel was Ahlness' mentor through the nonprofit American Corporate Partners program, created to help military personnel transition into civilian careers.

"What makes us successful is that we help them convert military resumes into civilian-speak," Etzel said. The program also helps military individuals identify companies with cultures and value systems that ring true to them.

Etzel said he saw that Ahlness had developed strengths that would transfer well to business, such as planning and leadership.

The skill set for Ahlness' new job was in part developed in his last Minnesota National Guard post as the diversity and inclusion director.

"The face of Minnesota is changing," he said, and it's important for members of the National Guard to "reflect the population that we're serving. They see we have people who look like them coming to help."

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IF YOU GO

A celebration honoring Minnesota Army National Guard Col. Eric Ahlness on his retirement will be from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday at American Legion Post 39, 2678 Seventh Ave. E., North St. Paul.