



Sisters, Erica and Roxane Gebhart, serve in the same unit in the Oklahoma Air National Guard. They took a photo opportunity on the way home from a training mission.

# Guarding America

*Two young Hereford enthusiasts continue the family tradition of serving in the military, even though it's not always easy.*

by Sara Gugelmeyer

**G**uarding America, defending freedom. For one Hereford family, that is more than just catchphrase. These are words generations of Gebharts have lived by since the Revolutionary War.

American Hereford Association member Erica and, National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) member Roxane are no exception. Just like their father Richard, they too are serving their country in the military.

## Like father, like daughters

Joining the military was not a tough decision for Richard Gebhart, commissioned into the Army as a distinguished military graduate of the University of Arkansas. Richard spent half of his childhood as an Army brat, the other half rancher's son because Richard's father served 20 years in the Army, including defending the U.S. in World War II and Korea, and retired as a lieutenant colonel.

"I had always had a dream to be an Army officer and not stay around the ranch, but go out and see the world," Richard says.

After finishing his training to be an infantry officer in 1978, Richard and his new bride, Susan, moved to Germany where Richard was stationed with the Third Armored Division.

Susan and Richard met at the University of Arkansas, and they were married when she was 19, just before his first active duty assignment. She was only halfway through college when Richard was sent to Germany, so she dropped out and moved there with him.



Pictured here in 1979, early in his career, Richard (left) was a 2nd Lieutenant and Weapons Platoon Leader in Höhenfels, Germany.

"I learned how to be away from home, speak German, get along in a different country and adjust to life in the military," Susan says. It wasn't always easy, but Richard and Susan made the best of it.

"Richard's dad told me when we got married, 'Here's how it goes in the military: You can decide to be happy anyplace you go, but if you decide to be unhappy, you will be, so just set your mind to being happy.' I really took that advice to heart and used it many times during the years we were on active duty," Susan recalls.

Despite her will to keep a positive attitude, it was difficult when Richard was gone about eight months out of the year during the four years they were in Germany, Susan says. Their first child, Erica, was born in the same Army hospital as Richard, in Frankfurt, Germany.

Toward the end of 1982, the Gebhart family returned to the States, Mississippi State University to be exact, where Richard was stationed to teach ROTC and both Richard and Susan continued their education. He earned his first master's degree in agricultural economics and animal science there. He also traveled to Fort Riley near Manhattan, Kan., in the summer to teach new recruits.

Richard says his favorite part of being in the Army was teaching young officers. But, the Army had more plans for him. "Uncle Sam said you've commanded

enough troops and worked with enough tankers and infantry guys; we are going to send you to develop another specialty. The specialty they chose for me was resource management, so they sent me to Syracuse University (New York) to work on a Master's of Business Administration."

After Richard completed his second master's degree, the Gebharts moved to Ft. Carson, Colo., where he worked in resource management in various roles. At one time he managed a budget of about \$150 million per year. He says he weaseled his way back to working with troops again and was deployed to Desert Storm and Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia. But first, their second daughter, Roxane, arrived.

After he returned from Saudi Arabia, the Gebharts moved to Ft. Leavenworth (Kansas) where Richard attended the Command and General Staff College.

#### Back in the cattle business

"We moved 12 times in 14 years," Susan says. They were a happy military family, but Susan confesses she missed cattle. Her grandparents had a cattle ranch around Tulsa, Okla., where Susan had spent a lot of time.

Then in 1992 Susan's grandfather, Floyd Sloan, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Concerned about his ability to look after the cattle, the family made the decision that either Richard and Susan move back to help or the cows must be sold. Richard applied for a teaching job at the University of Tulsa on somewhat of a lark, he says, and got it. He had to apply to be released from active duty, but thanks to the Clinton administration's effort to cut back on the Army, he was granted "retirement" by transferring to the reserves and would completely retire in 2008 as a colonel.

Also after moving to Tulsa, Richard started law school and the first two years were the toughest of their married life, Susan says.

Richard was busy with school,

teaching and commanding an Army reserve unit. Susan and the girls took care of the cattle on their own, and they were thankful for the Herefords' great dispositions. Any animal that was difficult was culled. "We simply had no ability to tolerate anything less than cows that did their jobs well and did it with a happy attitude," Susan explains.

Erica was in junior high school and quickly got involved in showing cattle through FFA. As a sophomore in high school, Erica started competing in NJHA shows with the family's home-raised Herefords. Roxane followed in her sister's footsteps to show Herefords as well.

The Gebharts continue to run about 100 head of mainly registered Herefords on Beacon Hill Ranch. Besides providing show prospects for Roxane to compete with, they also sell to other youth. The land has been in the family since 1910 and has some of the few untouched native hay meadows left in the area.

#### The tradition continues

Raising Herefords isn't the only family tradition Erica and Roxane have continued. They, too, decided to serve in the military.

As a 19-year-old, life decisions are plenty. For Erica one of those decisions was to join the Oklahoma

Air National Guard.

"At the time all I wanted to do was pay for college,"

Erica admits. "But then I realized that my family has a history with the military, and it became more of paying my dues and carrying on with the tradition."

Richard encouraged her to join, but said it was her decision. "It seems to make my relationship with my dad closer because we have something in common and have had common experiences in the military and inside jokes about it," Erica says.

Roxane also joined the Oklahoma Air National Guard, but she waited until she had completed one semester of college coursework. "I just wasn't quite sure right out of high school if I wanted to or not," Roxane says. But during her first semester in college, Roxane and her best friend went with Erica to her monthly training or "drill" and decided it was something they wanted to do — not only as their patriotic duty, but so they wouldn't have to dip into their parents' money for college expenses.

The decision became reality with seven weeks of basic training in San Antonio. But, Erica was basic



The whole Gebhart family (l to r): Matt Boyer holding daughter McKenzie, Erica, Richard, Susan, and Roxane



The "Star Spangled Banner" means more to the Gebharts than most. Pictured here during the 2009 JNHE opening ceremonies are Richard, Erica and McKenzie. Richard was chairman of the host state committee.



Former NJHA board member Roxane is very involved in the Hereford industry.

training wasn't that bad for her. "I had grown up with that lifestyle and mentality around my dad, so it wasn't a big deal for me. When I was growing up, we were moving around, and I was raised on active duty Army posts," Erica says.

She often jokes that it was the easiest time of her life because she didn't have to make any decisions. "People told me exactly what to do, and if you did it and followed the instructions, you were good to go," Erica says.

Physically, however, it was challenging for Erica, "I wasn't huge into sports or anything, so I did have to get myself into shape and run; and I hate to run."

Roxane completed basic training also in San Antonio, but with a much different experience. "The

physical part wasn't the hard part for me," she says. "They have so many people from so many family backgrounds and different parts of the country that they have to break everyone down so they are on the same mental level so you will work as a team. For me that was the hardest part of basic training; it's that I was not the individual that I was when I walked into basic training. I was now part of a team."

Also difficult was being away from home. "You are taken away from everything that you know, and my instructor only allowed us two phone calls the entire time."

Once basic training is completed, the airmen are only required to go to drill one weekend a month and annual training two weeks a year, but usually more time is spent serving. Now in her 11th year of service, Erica is a Technical Sergeant and unit training manager.

Erica and Roxane serve in the same unit and same career field, but with different ranks. Their career field is services, which includes food service, lodging, fitness/recreation, search and rescue, and mortuary affairs. Because they are in the National Guard, they must be prepared to tackle any specific tasks within these areas whenever necessary.

Erica explains, "We (the services unit) are generally the first unit that is deployed to a base, because we have to set up all the life-sustaining elements. They can't send a bunch of pilots and airplanes to the middle of the desert if they don't have a place to sleep or eat. So we are trained to go in with a team of engineers in the middle of the desert where there is nothing and build a runway and food service and lodging."

They are also trained to help with support of these troops after the base is established; for example, when Erica was deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, she worked in the recreation department as bartender, for which she earned a medal. "I was deployed in the

desert and worked in a bar and got a medal, but I didn't feel like I earned it," Erica says. So when the military asked for volunteers to help with mortuary affairs for casualties coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan, Erica saw the opportunity as her chance to do something she felt was more important.

The servicemen and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are first sent to Germany before they are sent home to their families. Erica and others from her unit helped them get home for proper burial or other arrangements. "It was tough, but I considered it an honor for myself to get them home to their families," Erica says.

"They always ask for volunteers for these types of jobs, because some people just can't handle it," she says. "It's hard and very emotionally draining."

Erica has been on other training missions and has also helped with operations such as the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. After spending 11 years in the military, Erica says, just like her father, her favorite part is working with young recruits. She is the direct supervisor for five younger airmen, and she mentors them on everything from military etiquette to college studies.

She says she has also enjoyed the travel. "I've been to places I never would have gone otherwise." But, her priorities are changing. She is happily married to Matt Boyer, and they have an 18-month-old daughter, McKenzie.

### Tough decisions

Erica's current enlistment is up in 2010 and the decision to re-enlist for another six years is going to be a tough one, she says. "At that point I would need six more years to retire and receive benefits, but I know at that point in my life my kids will be ready to go to junior nationals and play T-ball and that one weekend a month and two weeks a year will be something I have to worry about."

That's one of the hardest parts of being in the Air National

Guard, according to both Erica and Roxane. "Drill never falls on a good weekend," Roxane says. "And it's not like work; you can't just call in and say I'm not coming in." Of the 12 weekends a year, Roxane says she usually can only miss two, one of which has always been for the Junior National Hereford Expo. She is allowed this privilege because she has an impeccable record of being on time, being prepared and having a good reason. And the missed time has to be made up another weekend.

Roxane says another challenge of the military is dealing with the ranking system. "Say there's someone that is two or three ranks higher than you, but you know in the civilian world you would have a leg up on them; you work harder, you do your job better. Despite that, in the military you have to follow customs, courtesies and rank, and so what they say goes. You might

know it's not going to work, but if they tell you to do it this way, you have to do it their way."

But ultimately, the pros have outweighed the cons. "The biggest thing I'll take away from this is knowing how to work with people, no matter the circumstance. I have learned to deal with people I can't stand, people that frustrate me and normally I wouldn't even have a relationship with, I can do that now, because I have to. In the military it's mission first, I don't care if we don't get along, we better get the mission done."

Roxane will also have a tough decision in 2012 about re-enlisting. She is planning to graduate in December 2010 with her bachelor's degree in animal science with a business emphasis and then start law school.

But, whether they re-enlist or not, Roxane and Erica are proud to have served their country just like generations before them. Roxane says, "I think our family is fortunate enough to have a sense of commitment and duty to our country. Freedom is not free, but it's definitely worth fighting for. I think it's sad that it is often unexpected for an individual from my generation to be in the military."

Roxane and Erica say, "Our experience has made us appreciate our freedom. The commitment and the sacrifices are all part of understanding the real price of freedom and how precious our way of life is." **HW**