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S.C. troops see familiar faces

Governor, members of Congress drop in for dinner with Guard

By CHUCK CRUMBO

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Supper time came a little late for Lt. Michelle Roberts.

But she didn't mind. It was a chance to meet some state political leaders who on Saturday visited the Camp Phoenix headquarters of the S.C. National Guard's 218th Brigade Combat Team.

"It's good to know we have their support, and it's good to see good ol' South Carolina folks," said the Spartanburg soldier.

The "good ol'" S.C. folks were U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, Gov. Mark Sanford and U.S. Reps. Henry Brown and Bob Inglis, all Republicans.

Camp Phoenix was the last stop on a busy day that included a tour of the Afghan army's training center and a nearby base where S.C. guardsmen are deployed.

The politicians arrived in Afghanistan Saturday morning after a brief stay in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

While they got an opportunity to see firsthand S.C. troops training Afghans, it was the troops the politicians enjoyed meeting.

"It means a lot for you to be here," Maj. Jeff Kerby, of Lexington, said after introducing himself to Sanford outside the dining hall.

"Well, it's an honor for me to be here," the governor responded.

"It's an honor for me, too," Kerby said.

Graham, who also is an Air Force colonel and military judge, said mingling with some of the 1,800 S.C. National Guardsmen in Afghanistan "pumps me up."

"You get to be around people who believe in something bigger than themselves," he said. "They know why they're here. They see that they're making a difference, and they know it's all long-term, not short-term."

The soldiers and politicians sat down to a dinner of rotisserie chicken and spaghetti, and then posed for pictures.

"It's great that they could take time out of their busy schedules to come here and visit us in a war zone," said Sgt. Bryan Demery of Goose Creek.

Brig. Gen. Bob Livingston, 218th commander, briefed the visitors on the Guard's dual mission of training the Afghan army and police.

Livingston told the delegation that the task force he commands is short about 3,000 soldiers. Those soldiers wound up going to Iraq to support the surge in fighting, Livingston said.

Graham, a member of the Senate's Armed Services Committee, said he'll meet with Defense Secretary Robert Gates to see whether more troops can be sent to Afghanistan.

"I'm going to sit down and say, 'I know the surge is tough in Iraq, but we need to keep our eye on the ball here,'" Graham said.

Sanford, who also is an Air Force reservist, thought the troops were holding up well after being here since May.

"It seems folks are in great shape and in great spirits," Sanford said. "And it seems like folks are excited about their mission."