MISSION: MPAS-ible – The Right Pay at The Right Time for The Georgia Army National Guard

NASCIO 2020 State IT Recognition Awards

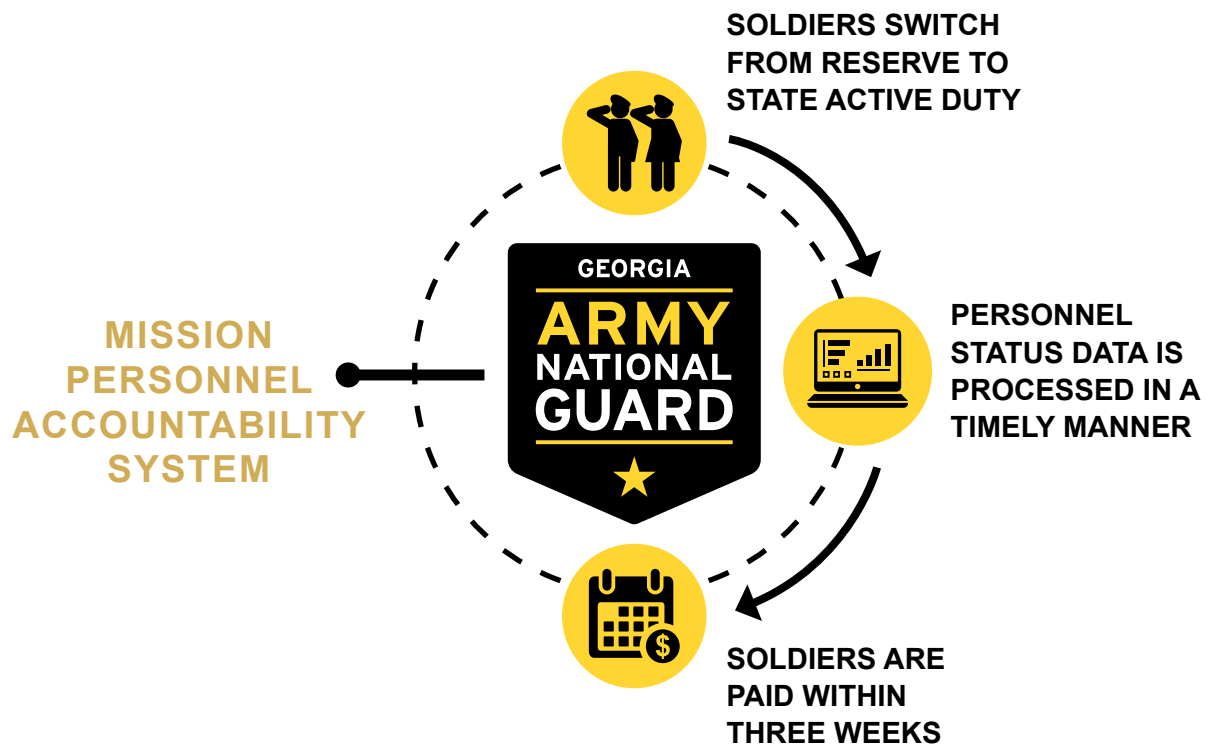|	
Category:	Business Process Innovations
State:	Georgia
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Project Initiation Date:	February 1, 2017
Project End Date:	July 1, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2016, Hurricane Matthew stormed up the Georgia coast, bringing powerful winds, rain, and flooding that left families homeless and thousands without power. Storm debris blocked roads, making it even tougher for emergency service crews to provide relief.

Georgia's governor activated the Georgia National Guard, bringing more than 3,000 soldiers and airmen to the state's aid. Behind the scenes, another colossal effort was launched. This one administrative, but critical. All those Guardsmen needed to be boarded into Georgia's state employment system so they could be paid. Sound simple? Hardly.

State and Guard administrators did their best, but for some soldiers, pay didn't come until six months later. How could that happen? The pay process relied on manual entry of personnel information, multiple hand-offs between different parties, and back and forth exchanges for corrections. In short, it was in need of rescue.

The Georgia Army National Guard mobilized a team of experts to find a solution. Their goal: Ensure that soldiers switching from reserve to state active duty would be paid within three weeks. The team would need to find effective ways of handling sensitive information management and personnel systems crossing both the state and federal levels. It took time – almost two years. What they devised, with help from civilian contractors, would come to be the Mission Personnel Accountability System (MPAS).

With initial efforts stretching back to 2017, MPAS was deployed in its full form in 2018 and then matured. Since July 2019, it has served as the primary system of record for personnel duty status for the Personnel Office, which manages human resources and payroll for the Georgia Army National Guard. The system has proven to be just as capable as the Guardsmen MPAS serves.

SOLDIERS SWITCH FROM RESERVE TO STATE ACTIVE DUTY

MISSION PERSONNEL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

GEORGIA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

PERSONNEL STATUS DATA IS PROCESSED IN A TIMELY MANNER

SOLDIERS ARE PAID WITHIN THREE WEEKS

CONCEPT

No one particularly liked the old system, manual data entry, emailing back and forth, and Army National Guard unit commanders sending duty roster details multiple times daily. It was tedious, and it invited errors. It was ripe for replacement. But what an undertaking.

Keeping up with personnel status reports ("PERSTAT" in Army lingo) isn't as simple as flipping an on/off switch. Pay status within a unit varies with personnel status (state active duty, full-time duty, Title 10 active duty). Pay scales may be stipulated by a state in some instances and by federal standards in others, depending on the mission and the circumstances of activation.

PERSONNEL STATUS:

STATE ACTIVE **DUTY**   FULL-TIME **DUTY**   TITLE 10 ACTIVE **DUTY**

Accounting for all these variables and coming up with a modern, streamlined, efficient process that would assure prompt, accurate payment of Guardsmen – that's what project leaders were after with the Mission Personnel Accountability System (MPAS). They hoped MPAS would ultimately help give peace of mind to soldiers and their families and help soldiers get paid within three weeks.

The Georgia Army National Guard and the Department of Defense (Georgia DOD) dedicated full-time IT experts to the task. They surveyed the Florida Army National Guard, which had a similar program, to determine if theirs might meet Georgia's needs. It wasn't quite a fit, so they committed to developing the software from the ground up with input along the way from the people who would use it. And they modeled MPAS in part on the U.S. Army's Deployed Theater Accounting System, an automated tool for keeping up-to-the-minute PERSTAT.
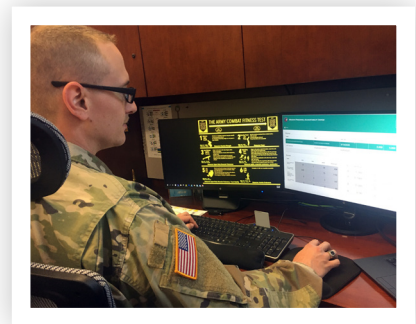
No one was a fan of the old system, but replacing it would be a complex undertaking. Still, if it meant Guardsmen could be assured peace of mind, it'd be worth it.
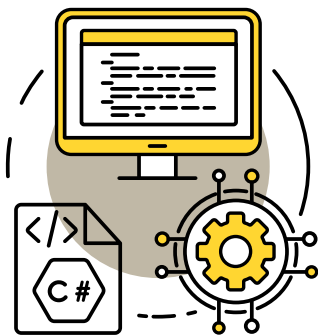
The developer team built it in C# (C Sharp) programming language because of its general-purpose, simple-yet-modern nature. They kept firmly in mind the software's eventual users would be everyone from unit commanders to staff within the Georgia DOD Personnel Office. The program needed to be versatile, easy-to-learn, simple-to-use, and efficient. What they produced was MPAS.

CONCEPT *(continued)*

The new system houses and handles all the personnel status data used before, during, and after missions. Data is downloaded from the federal personnel system onto Army National Guard spreadsheets and uploaded into MPAS at the beginning of each mission. If a Guard unit has Air Guard or State Defense Forces (SDF) personnel assigned or attached, information on these personnel is imported into MPAS from Excel spreadsheets. Once it's all in MPAS, complete and accurate information is accessible there to authorized parties all across the Georgia Army National Guard. Personnel additions and edits can be made in MPAS each day during a Guard mission. A snapshot of each soldier's duty and pay status is taken at midnight, and the data is then sent to the Personnel Office for administrative processing.

The IT team helped train users on MPAS and were available to troubleshoot any technical challenges. From development to deployment, it was a smooth implementation of a new system.

"I have been very pleased with the smooth transition of the program for State Active Duty orders…Transitioning from a technician status to SAD orders did not interrupt my paycheck, which my family heavily relies on. In the past, my family would be hesitant about my status changing due to constant pay issues that would arise, but I have not had any issues...which has allowed me to focus on the mission."

**~Specialist Tori Miller**

NO PAYCHECK INTERRUPTION

Today, MPAS is one of the Georgia Army National Guard's most widely used IT systems, and it's accomplishing what it was designed to do. Following its implementation, active duty soldiers have consistently seen their pay in the target three weeks or less. No more months-long lags or error-induced backlogs.

MPAS has proved effective in many Guard missions including:

- **Super Bowl LIII** – January 2019
- **Georgia Emergency Management Agency Cyber Support** – July 2019
- **Georgia Cyber Court Attack** – July 2019
- **Georgia Cyber Patrol** – July 2019
- **Hurricane Dorian** – September 2019
- **COVID-19 Response** – June 2020
- **Atlanta Protest Response** – June 2020

Communication and collaboration within the Georgia Army National Guard, especially with the Personnel Office, have greatly improved. Cost savings of approximately $160,000 have been achieved since the full implementation of MPAS. The savings are based on reduction in hours spent making corrections, revising requests for active duty orders, calling unit commanding offices to validate each Guardsman's duty status at the time of the mission, and more. MPAS has added fidelity to the process of assigning personnel statuses for members of the Georgia Army National Guard, helping ensure streamlined communication of that information.
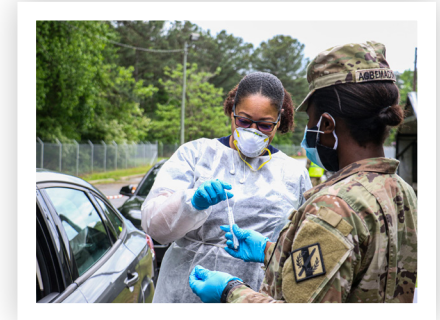
The following are tasks eliminated thanks to MPAS:

- Manually recording a daily roster of unit personnel

- Reversal of extra paychecks when Guardsmen were paid in error due to faulty personnel status reporting

MPAS provides a database the Georgia Army National Guard can use to confirm accuracy of information. That information changes frequently during missions due to factors like promotions, pay increases, and more. MPAS creates a single resource for personnel to turn to when confirming information. Accurate information is then reflected in the Georgia employee pay system, so Guardsmen can be paid alongside their civilian, state employee counterparts in the same pay cycle.

Process innovation and system integration were guiding principles for the MPAS project. That integration pays dividends in efficiency. Members of the Georgia Army National Guard are now paid in the same intervals used in the Georgia state employee pay system, eliminating need for a separate pay structure.

MPAS provides Georgia a uniquely efficient personnel accounting system, unparalleled among the other National Guard organizations.

The vision for MPAS exceeded simple replacement of a tedious manual process. Ambitions for the project included giving the Georgia Army National Guard a serious competitive advantage in retention of its members, a crucial consideration. Assuring that members will be paid in a timely, accurate fashion supports that goal. After all, Guardsmen on active duty may give up wages from civilian jobs during their service. They rely on their Guard pay to come through in a timely manner.

With a budget of $500,000 plus maintenance costs, MPAS ranks as the largest Georgia Army National Guard IT project to date where there was no legacy system.

EFFICIENT AND TIMELY PAY

Much was learned that will help guide future projects. A key lesson: If you want to build a system and processes that will work and that will be readily adopted, collaborate early and often with those who will be asked to use the system eventually. That engagement model was followed with MPAS and paid off handsomely.

MPAS transformed the way the Georgia Army National Guard approaches a central function: Ensuring pay for its personnel. In the previous system, participants in the process had a view only of their own tasks. They lacked visibility across the full process, start to finish. That created inefficiency and avoidable roadblocks (e.g., waiting for someone else who's waiting for you, and so on).

In broadest terms, MPAS ensures that all members of the Georgia Army National Guard called to state active duty can perform their service without any doubts about receiving the right pay at the right time. That's only fitting for these valued service men and women.