

Southern Maryland News

By Nicole Clark

Maryland Army National guardsmen have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, where they flew unmanned aircraft that helped them outwit their enemies.

In one incident, guardsmen watched insurgents load improvised explosive devices into two vehicles. "What our guys did was call in an airstrike and they dropped 500-pound bombs on the cars," said spokesman Lt. Col. Charles Kohler. "Who knows how many people they saved by doing that."

But some 15 to 20 Maryland guardsmen have been doing the high-tech maintenance and training for unmanned aircraft work in a tent and in a trailer at Webster Field. Big changes are in the works for the facilities, and those changes will help them do their jobs.

Today, Aug. 29, the Maryland National Guard is scheduled to break ground on a 10,000 square-foot, \$4.3 million unmanned aircraft facility. "It's going to be state-of-the-art," Kohler said.

The new site will include runway access roads, hangar aprons, a maintenance bay, offices and classroom space. Construction is expected to be completed next summer.

The Navy also plans to break ground at Webster Field today for a 18,000 square-foot electronics and communications facility, according to a release from Gary Younger, public affairs officer at Patuxent River Naval Air Station.

Government-issued base access identification is required to attend the events.

The Navy site will be home to the Special Communications Requirements Division. The group develops, tests, installs and maintains equipment used by the Navy, Army, Air Force, Joint Special Operations Forces and other government agencies.

The \$9.6 million center will include secure offices and laboratories and spaces for mechanical engineering. Construction is expected to be complete next August.

Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) and Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) are scheduled to attend, according to a release from Hoyer's office.

Hoyer said he has worked hard to secure \$11.043 million for the Navy facility.

The Special Communications Requirements center supports "a robust business base that has created jobs in our community since the 1980s," Hoyer wrote in a statement. He also supported the president's budget request for the Maryland National Guard's unmanned aircraft facility and "ensured the facility did not get cut from the budget."

More expansion is planned for Webster Field, Hoyer said. Plans are under way to replace an air operations tower. Work should begin within the next year.