

LINCOLN - Saying the time is right for him to turn over his command to a new leader, Maj. General Roger Lempke said today that he will retire in early November.

Lempke, 60, has guided the Nebraska National Guard through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - its heaviest combat operations since World War II.

As the state's adjutant general, he commanded the Guard as it responded to the tornado that nearly destroyed Hallam in 2004, wildfires that scorched northwest Nebraska last year and an ice storm that left much of central Nebraska without power earlier this year.

He also oversaw the Nebraska Guard's mobilization to support Gulf Coast states after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Lempke said the Guard faces new challenges and needs fresh leadership.

Gov. Dave Heineman, who stood at Lempke's side during today's announcement, described Lempke as "one of the best adjutant generals in the nation."

"I am very proud of him," Heineman said.

The governor said he would announce a procedure for seeking Lempke's replacement next week.

Lempke was saluted by members of Nebraska's congressional delegation.

"Under General Lempke's leadership, the Nebraska National Guard has

answered the call in our state, throughout the country and all over the world," said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb.

While the Guard's overseas deployments increased, Lempke bolstered its traditional homeland missions, including state emergencies, deployment to the U.S.-Mexico border and the Hurricane Katrina mobilization, said Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb.

"All of Nebraska appreciates the service of General Lempke at this very demanding and challenging time for the Guard, Hagel said.

Former Gov. Mike Johanns appointed Lempke as adjutant general in 2000, making him the first career air officer to hold the post.

Lempke said today that he always intended to retire after six to seven years as commander, because military organizations work best with fresh leadership.

"The military is always about leading with energy and then stepping aside for the next task, and I believe a lot in that system. This wasn't a job I was just going to camp in forever," Lempke said in an interview.

He said other Guard leaders are well-prepared to take over.

Lempke has been widely praised for both his leadership in Nebraska and for his vocal role advocating for the Guard as president of the national association of Guard commanders.

"Gen. Lempke is an outstanding adjutant general. He's a terrific military person that I've enjoyed working with," Heineman said.

After graduating from the Air Force Academy, Lempke served 10 years on active duty as an instructor pilot and project manager, then spent several years as an Air Force reservist working at Offutt Air Force Base's Strategic Air Command.

He joined the Air National Guard in 1984.

His vision, when he first took command, was to transform the organization into a larger, more relevant force.

Seven years later, more than 3,000 of the Nebraska Guard's 3,600 troops have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, many making more than one deployment.

In 2005, Lempke took on a national role when the Adjutants General Association of the United States - consisting of all 54 commanders of state and territorial Guards - elected him the group's president.

He used that platform to advocate for the Guard on a number of contentious issues. He helped rebuff Pentagon proposals to shrink Guard forces by up to 24,000 and to close several Guard installations.

He has pressed Washington for more funding for Guard units, which are short of equipment around the country, and backed a plan to add a four-star Guard general to the other service commanders on the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

When The World-Herald named him 2006 Midlander of the Year in December, Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said Lempke's leadership had been vital as the Guard's role has changed into an active combat force.

"The American people have seen vividly that the Guard is no longer a supplemental force," Nelson said. "It serves in seamless fashion with the active duty."

The Nebraska Guard has grown even as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have meant almost certain deployments to a war zone. The Guard recruited a record 508 soldiers last year and the force topped 3,600 soldiers for the first time.

"I'm very, very proud of where the state Guard is today. We've increased our end-strength by 20 percent since I took over, and we're very well-regarded for our missions overseas," he said.

Lempke said he intends to write a book about his experience in the National Guard and to stay involved in Guard issues. He said he hasn't ruled out directing his energy toward politics, but "I don't have any plans related to politics."

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