



WASHINGTON MILITARY DEPARTMENT

EVERGREEN

WINTER / SPRING 2026

MAGAZINE



SUPER BOWL PARADE

Washington National Guard partners with Seattle Seahawks for first Super Bowl Parade since 2014



COMMANDER IN CHIEF
WASHINGTON STATE GOVERNOR
The Honorable Bob Ferguson

THE ADJUTANT GENERAL
Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
Karina Shagren

STATE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER
Joseph Siemandel

CONTRIBUTORS
Reyfield Betz
Peter Chang
Abigail Clark
Zach Cunningham
Steven Friederich
Bianca Hayden
Dustin Jeffords
Jordan Kvale
Remi Milsagle
Kristen Schuler
Matthew Sprowl
Adeline Witherspoon

FEATURES

3 THE BEST IN THE WORLD!
Washington National Guard supports Seahawks Super Bowl celebration



5 ONE LAST FLIGHT
Aviation unit delivers WWII PBV "Catalina" to its forever home

15 FOUNDATION DAY
Washington Foundation Day to strengthen homeland defense readiness

25 CYBER FIRST
194th Wing hosts Cyber Protection Team Conference

27 FINDING STILLNESS
Inside CPT Paula Ramirez's sound bath sessions

'WE'RE THE BEST IN THE WORLD!'

WASHINGTON NATIONAL GUARD SUPPORTS SEAHAWKS SUPER BOWL CELEBRATION



A sea of blue and green filled Fourth Avenue in Seattle on Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2026, as nearly a million fans celebrated the Super Bowl LX champion Seattle Seahawks and the franchise's second title. As in 2014, the Washington National Guard played an integral role in the historic victory parade.

While fans celebrated on a sunny Wednesday morning, the real work to get the parade set up happened in the days leading up to the event. Representatives from the Seahawks, Seafair, Joint Base Lewis-McChord and the Washington National Guard began staging vehicles in Lumen Field, getting the celebration ready for the eager fan base.

"The opportunity to work with Seafair was a new experience for me. It was great to make new connec-

tions and see how their team prepared, resourced and executed the large-scale event," said Maj. Michelle Kelly, 181st Brigade Support Battalion and officer in charge for the event.

The morning of the festivities, Guardsmen arrived early, waiting inside Lumen Field by their vehicles. As the celebration kicked off, players and coaches addressed the crowd before loading into vehicles for the parade. This was more than a fan party — it was a massive, coordinated civic event that blended community pride with disciplined support from local and state partners.

"The vibe was amazing, the community showed love for the Seahawks and military team," said Kelly. "Many patrons were excited and thankful to have the military members present."



The Washington National Guard's presence echoed a long-standing tradition of partnership with the Seattle Seahawks that stretches back to Seattle's first Super Bowl championship in 2014. During that earlier victory parade, Guard members escorted the team through the crowd and helped ensure safe movement through downtown.

"To be a Seahawks season ticket holder since day one, and to be the battalion commander of the 181st Brigade Support Battalion and support the parade with our trucks and soldiers, as well as dozens of airmen from the Washington Air National Guard, was an incredible honor for all of us and one of the best missions of my 30-year military career," said retired U.S. Army Col. Adam Iwaszuk, who was the officer in charge of the Guard support in 2014.

Just like 12 years ago, the Washington National Guard's 10th Civil Support Team was working behind the scenes with first responders to ensure the safety of all participants, while Seattle Police coordinated to keep crowds safe and traffic moving.

"It was similar to what we do during games but with more coordination with Seattle Police and Fire," said Maj. Jaymar Imperial, operations officer, 10th Civil Support Team. "The parade was pretty historic because of the amount of people who attended, which added to the complexity of how we operated. We were able to adjust with our local responders to ensure we kept everybody safe."

For the Washington National Guard — whose members are often drawn from the very communities they serve — this parade was both a proud moment and a reminder of the tight-knit connection between military service and local identity in the Pacific Northwest.

"It is always great to be out in a positive light for the state," said Sgt. 1st Class Rebecca Gines, medical operations non-commissioned officer with the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team. "These last few years have been filled with the Guard supporting the state in times of emergencies. Sometimes it seems like it is kind of a dreadful feeling that things are bad. So to be asked by the Seahawks to have our National Guard out to get the players through the parade is a good feeling. The crowd was so positive, and it was great to see the city, and really the state for that matter, in celebration. It was a full vibe that you couldn't help but join."

As the Seahawks closed the procession and the crowd's roar echoed off skyscrapers, the shared sense of unity between a team, its fans, and the organizations that helped carry their celebration underscored the deeper bond at the heart of Seattle's championship moment. For the Guard members that were on hand to support the event, it was another day of supporting the community they have served for more than 170 years.

"Walking through the route and feeling the energy of the crowd was simply amazing and something I won't forget," commented Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh, the adjutant general, on his social media page. "Huge thanks to the Seafair and the Seahawks organizations to trust us to help them celebrate in style."

(Photos by Adeline Witherspoon, Story by Joseph Siemandel)





One Last Flight: Aviation unit delivers WWII PBY “Catalina” To Its Forever Home



A story, years in the making, came to an end for the city of Oak Harbor when a CH-47 Chinook air crew from the Washington Army National Guard air lifted a World War II-era PBY-5a bomber from downtown Oak Harbor to the Pacific Northwest Naval Air Museum on January 21, 2026.

“This event marks a proud and memorable milestone not only for the PNW Naval Air Museum but also for the many volunteers, agencies, and government officials whose dedication and perseverance made it possible,” said Barry Meldrum, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Naval Air Museum. “It is truly a triumph for our community and for all who have supported the museum along the way. We are deeply grateful for the passion, hard work, and belief that helped turn this dream into reality.”

The event had significant meaning for Whidbey Island, which was home to a Squadrons of PBYs in 1942 when they were put into service during World War II. The PBY-5A served in patrol, search-and-rescue, and long-range bombing roles. Known for its versatility, it could operate from water or runways, dropping bombs/torpedoes and carrying heavy armament, serving as the “eyes of the fleet” in various roles from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with famous “Black Cat” night attack missions. The Navy retired the plane in 1957 and many found their way to plane bone yards, some to museums. In 2010 the museum won the plane in an auction and a private helicopter company lifted it to Oak Harbor. Since that time the museum has moved to a permanent location and wanted the PBY to also have a permanent display.

As the museum began looking at options of how to move the plane, they realized the issues they had moving something that heavy and large. They looked at trailering the plane, but the road system and crossings would be too small. They looked at using a boat but that still wouldn’t get it to the museum. That is when Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Bobeck, former state aviation officer for the New York Army National Guard and museum board member, suggested tapping the Washington Army National Guard for assistance.

The team at the Pacific Northwest Naval Air Museum reached out to the Guard this past summer and began building the packet and conducting stress tests on the plane to see if it could withstand the air travel for one last trip.

“That is when we thought that maybe this is possible but of course needed to do that paperwork to see if it was allowed,” said Chief Warrant Officer Four Crosby Olsen, pilot in charge of the mission.

For the city of Oak Harbor, the significance of the day and the 83-year-old PBY-5a Catalina, were on full display the morning of January 20, 2025, when the aircrew flew in to attempt the lift. More than one thousand community members came out to watch as Guard members from Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 168th General Support Aviation began doing preparation for the lift and movement.

“The whole town came out to see this event,” said Olsen. “It’s a cool opportunity. I’ve been doing this for 18-and-a-half years and this is the first time something like this has come across for me to fly.”

Originally scheduled for October, this lift was postponed numerous times and almost didn’t happen and the morning of the 20th, spectators probably thought that the PBY would never make it to the museum. As the Chinook hovered about the PBY, the plane spun around right as it was lifting.

“We noticed that the amount of down draft coming off the Chinook was causing the PBY to move too much, and we knew that the window of time we had was limited so we decided that safety was the number one priority and disconnected and repositioned the plane,” said Crosby. “We came back the next morning with different equipment ready to go.”

Equipped with a long cable the Chinook lifted the PBY, hovering above the park before making the turn over the harbor and towards its forever home at the museum.

“Though I have been impressed on several occasions in my life, this experience will rank atop the list as the most inspiring, most jaw-dropping of operations I could have participated in. I am humbled by the professionalism and dedication of the Army National Guard and was privileged to work with them on this mission,” said Meldrum. “The determination and clear focus of the men and women who fixated on the success of this fantastic idea – with no casualties of any kind – was truly remarkable. Many thanks to everyone involved in making this happen. It took many months, and overcame many hurdles, but our friends at the Washington Army National Guard persisted. Thank you to the ‘slingers,’ engineers, mechanics and crew for the creativity to solve problems, and for agreeing to work with our ‘Old Lady.’ We all know there was no flight manual on how to lift a WWII PBY but working with everyone at the Guard was smooth and friendly.”

(Photos by Adeline Witherspoon, Story by Joseph Siemandel)



NEW LAW ESTABLISHES CIVIL AIR PATROL AS OFFICIAL DIVISION WITHIN WASHINGTON MILITARY DEPARTMENT

Washington state has taken a significant step to strengthen its disaster response framework, formally establishing the Washington Wing of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) as a division within the Washington Military Department (WMD).

“As a former cadet, I’m especially excited to welcome the Civil Air Patrol into a closer partnership with the Washington Military Department,” said Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh, the director of the WMD and the state’s adjutant general. “This is a natural fit that strengthens both organizations. It enhances our ability to serve communities in times of need while continuing to invest in the development of future leaders.”

Earlier this month, Gov. Bob Ferguson signed Senate Bill 6046, which integrates CAP into the state’s emergency response structure, providing faster and more coordinated access to its aviation assets and trained volunteer force. The legislation, introduced by Sen. Keith Wagoner from Washington’s 39th legislative district, received unanimous support in the Senate and passed the House with strong bipartisan backing.

Col. Sid Wiggs, commander of the Washington Wing of the Civil Air Patrol, said the change formalizes long-standing

partnerships across the state.

“This legislation reflects the way we already work together and provides clearer alignment moving forward,” Wiggs said. “It strengthens coordination with our partners and ensures we are well-positioned to support state, local, and tribal agencies when called upon.”

Washington’s CAP Wing brings a substantial volunteer force and aviation capability to this partnership. The organization includes 26 squadrons and nearly 2,000 members statewide, with trained personnel such as pilots, mission observers and scanners, and specialized roles including airborne photographers and small unmanned aircraft system (sUAS) operators. Its fleet includes 13 aircraft and five sUAS platforms used for aerial imagery and assessment.

With the creation of a dedicated division, emergency managers expect enhanced response times for search and rescue operations, disaster reconnaissance, and aerial damage assessments. The new law enables the governor to activate CAP personnel under state active duty for missions supporting state, local, and tribal agencies, if necessary.

“This relationship enables better coordination before, during, and after disasters,” said Robert Ezelle, director of the state’s Emergency Management Division. “Incorporating the Civil Air Patrol into the Washington Military Department provides tangible benefits to communities, particularly as resources are stretched across all levels of government.”

Beyond emergency response, the law reinforces CAP’s role in youth development. Through its cadet program, the organization provides leadership training, aerospace education, and character development opportunities for young people across the state.

The legislation also enhances operational support for CAP by providing greater access to National Guard facilities and administrative resources, while strengthening coordination with state emergency management partners.

Importantly, the law does not alter CAP’s federal status or mission. The organization will continue to operate under its existing federal authorities while gaining expanded ability to support state-directed missions more efficiently.

- DRAWING A NEW MAP -

STATEWIDE TRANSFORMATION REDEFINES WASHINGTON ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

The Washington Army National Guard is undergoing a sweeping transformation that will reorganize units, relocate formations across the state, introduce new technology-driven missions and modernize key career fields.

Already underway is the transformation of the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, which is replacing its Strykers with lighter, faster vehicles and implementing a dramatically different force structure as the brigade transforms to a mobile brigade under the Army's ongoing transformation initiative.

"Change isn't always easy, but this is a big win for us," said Brig. Gen. Paul Sellars, commanding general of the Washington Army National Guard when the change was announced in September 2025. "Being chosen to make the shift to a mobile brigade is a testament to our organization and shows just how strong and capable our team is." Equipment changes are already underway. The 81st began turning in Stryker vehicles in late 2025, and the brigade's first Infantry Squad Vehicles are expected to arrive in Spring 2026. The full fleet should be delivered by early 2027 in time to support a rotation at the National Training Center.

Meanwhile, communication efforts have begun to help soldiers being affected by the transformation find new units to continue their service. Along with new equipment, the brigade is implementing a new Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE), which will take effect by the end of March. The change will reorganize several units across the formation and lead to the deactivation of the 898th Brigade Engineer Battalion.

"We knew this was going to be a significant change for the force structure, but we did the best we could to return units back their historic lineage," said Sellars.

The battalion, which includes combat engineer, signal, military intelligence and headquarters companies, will case its colors as part of the restructuring, though several subordinate elements will continue under their historic lineages elsewhere in the state.

This will mark the second time in the past two decades that the 898th Battalion's colors have been cased. The unit previously deactivated in 2005 after returning home from Iraq. While the battalion headquarters will

inactivate again, elements of the unit will continue under different designations. A Combat Engineer Company – Infantry will remain in Vancouver and carry on the 898 lineage, while the battalion's Military Intelligence and Signal companies will revert to their historic designations as the 281st Military Intelligence Company and the 241st Signal Company, remaining at Camp Murray and Marysville, respectively.

By the summer of 2026, both the 1st and 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment will add a new Multi-Purpose Company (MPC), a newly developed, experimental, high-tech reconnaissance and strike unit, to their MTOE. These units will be stationed at Geiger Field in Spokane and Marysville, respectively.

The 161st will also stand up a new Multi-Functional Reconnaissance Company that will report directly to the 81st Brigade command and be located on Camp Murray. This experimental unit is designed to provide brigade commanders with advanced, integrated reconnaissance, surveillance, and electronic warfare capabilities, using drones, robotics, and traditional infantry scouts to find, fix, and potentially destroy enemy targets with cutting-edge tech for Multi-Domain Operations.

"This is an exciting time to be in the 81st Brigade, with the new force structure, new vehicles and emerging missions," said Sellars.

Several units will also relocate as part of the transformation:

Detachment 1, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment will move from Walla Walla to join the

rest of the unit at the new Richland Readiness Center.

Detachment 1, Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment will move from the Redmond Armory to join the rest of the unit at the newly renovated Anacortes Readiness Center.

Detachment 1, Headquarters and Alpha Batteries, 2nd Battalion, 146th Field Artillery Regiment will relocate to the Thurston County Readiness Center.

The 181st Brigade Support Battalion will also undergo changes as its companies reflag under new designations. Golf Company 181st Brigade Support Battalion will move from Ephrata to the Yakima Training Center Armed Forces Readiness Center and become Charlie Company.

Significant changes are also planned for the Information Operations and Public Affairs career fields within the 56th Theater Information Operations Group.

In 2025, the Army ordered the implementation of a new Information Warfare (IWar) branch to consolidate, streamline, and modernize capabilities for competition, crisis, and conflict. Information Warfare is a key part of the Army's continuous transformation across the components. Led by the Special Operations Center of Excellence (SOCoE), this branch merges Information Operations (FA 30) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) personnel to create a unified, specialized force that operates across information, human, and physical dimensions of the opera-



tional environment to deceive, disrupt, degrade or destroy enemy troops, systems, and decision makers.

“The IWAR Branch will consolidate, focus, and bring unity of effort to develop, integrate, and affect an adversary’s Command and Control, while protecting our own,” said Col. Casey De Groof, commander of the 56th Theater Information Operations Group. “The skill sets within the 56th to provide strategic intel, inform, influence, and operationalized protection not only align, but will grow with this initiative.”

Another major change announced in January 2026 was the Army’s decision to make Public Affairs an official basic branch.

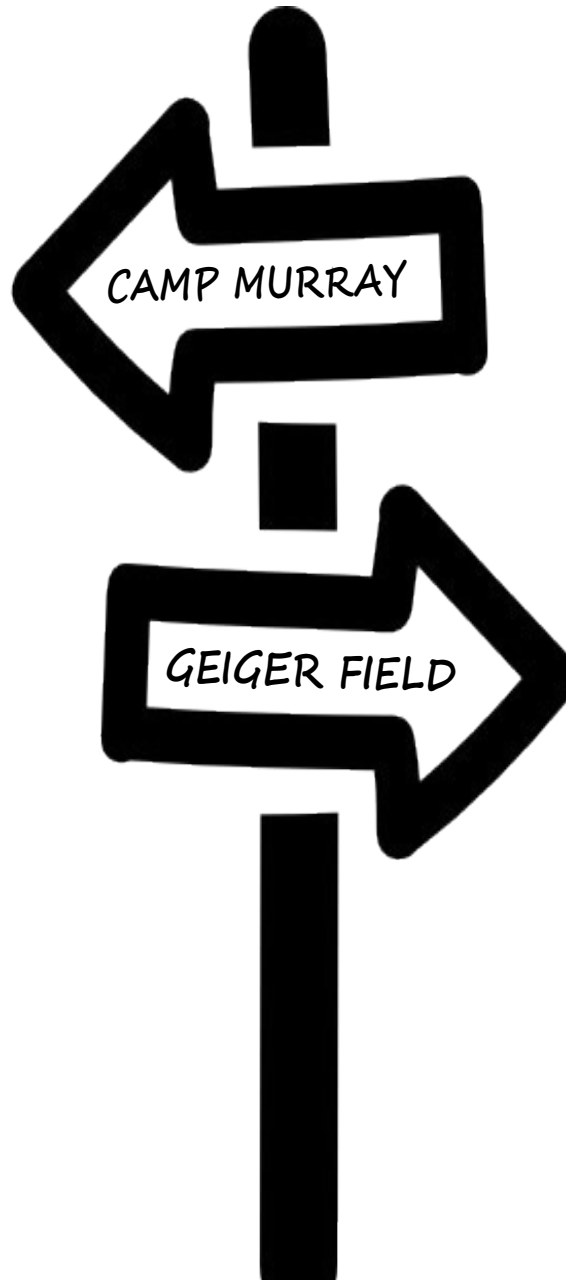
“The Inform function is a critical part of gaining information advantage, and our 122nd Public Affairs team is uniquely practiced and situated to contribute to the Army’s transformation of operations in the information environment. These branch changes showcase the importance of professionalizing information for the future fight,” De Groof added.

Public Affairs personnel, including officers (46A) and specialists (46S), act as media liaisons, create content, and advise commanders. They tell the Army’s story through news, social media, and community engagement to support recruitment and operations.

Currently officers transition into the Public Affairs career field after spending time in their basic branch. This change will help with developing new officers and expand career opportunities for enlisted soldiers and will be fully operating as a branch by the end of 2026.

The 341st Military Intelligence Battalion will see one unit move during the transformation, as Alpha Company, 341st Military Intelligence Battalion leaves Fairchild Air Force Base in early fiscal year 2027 and joins the rest of the battalion at the Information Operations Readiness Center on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

“The units of the 56th all have an important role in transformation and in strengthening our Guard partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific,” said De Groof. “The consolidation of the 341st allows our teams to streamline activities and take advantage of the training and relationships we have across units on JBLM.”



The 96th Troop Command will also experience significant movement in late fiscal year 2026 and early 2027.

The 506th Military Police Detachment will move from the Information Operations Readiness Center to the Redmond Armory, which gives it their first stand-alone unit since leaving the Centralia Armory in 2019.

Meanwhile, the 286th Engineers Fire Fighting Team, a specialized unit that handles military-grade fires, will move from Pangborn Memorial Airport to Yakima Training Center.

The 144th Digital Liaison Detachment will move before the end of the year from Geiger Field to the Aviation Readiness Center on Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The 144th DLD provides liaison capability between Army forces and multinational headquarters to ensure communication, mutual understanding, and unity of purpose and action.

“The DLD works a lot with I Corp and our active duty counterparts on overseas deployment training, so this move makes sense for them,” said Sellars.

One of the most significant moves will happen in early 2027 as 96th Troop Command’s Headquarters and the Headquarters for the Washington National Guard’s Homeland Response Force (HRF) moves from Joint Base Lewis-McChord to the Armed Forces Reserve Center on Fairchild Air Force Base. The move puts all command and control and units that are part of Washington’s HRF in eastern Washington.

“This is a legacy move that has been discussed for some time,” said Sellars. “By moving the 96th headquarters to Fairchild, the Homeland Response Force can come together quickly in the event of a large scale disaster, like a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake in western Washington. It also moves a major subordinate command to the Spokane area and provides growth opportunities in eastern Washington.”

Despite the changes, leaders say the transformation will create new opportunities for soldiers across the formation.

“Our troops are going to be able to look across the new formation and find opportunities,” said Sellars. “It’s going to give opportunities for everyone we have to serve. They might be in different places or different jobs or locations, but still here serving at home in Washington.” *Story by Joseph Siemandel*



HOW DID STRYKER TURN-IN GO?

The Heartbreak of the Century... or just another Tuesday at the Motorpool. When the Washington Army National Guard announced the transition from the iconic Stryker to the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV), we knew the “breakup” had to be cinematic. Watch as we turn in our 8-wheeled soulmates in the most dramatic, slow-motion, K-Drama fashion possible. Will there be tears? Yes. Will there be a dramatic OST playing while we hand over the keys? Absolutely!

FINDING UNREINFORCED MASONRY BUILDINGS



A team of volunteers accompanied by seismic experts went out on the streets of Bainbridge Island this past fall to look for Unreinforced Masonry Buildings (URMs) that could become dangerous during an earthquake. This is part of an effort to test out a new guidebook that teaches communities how to do sidewalk surveys and build inventories of these structures in their community.

The Bainbridge Island survey follows efforts in Tacoma and Everett in recent years to work with local communities to identify their Unreinforced Masonry Buildings. These previous surveys helped craft the URM Building Survey Workflow Guidebook([Opens an external site in a new window](#)), which was produced by Cascadia Region Earthquake Workgroup (CREW). The Bainbridge Island survey is the first to utilize the state's newly developed URM survey application that all jurisdictions will be able to utilize moving forward.

"Most small jurisdictions don't have a lot of time or ability to do a thorough inventory," said Maximilian Dixon, the hazards and outreach program supervisor. "That's why this guidebook is important and our partnerships are important. With these surveys and data local governments provide, we can create the scope of the URM problem, understand how big of a problem this is, where it's concentrated and look into how are we going to get funding for this. It's much more difficult to push for funding if we don't have evidence of the problem."

Back in 2018, the state Legislature provided some funding to the Department of Commerce to conduct a survey of Washington's URMs([Opens in a new window](#)). State agencies collaborated to review 15,200 buildings statewide and used existing data on these structures to identify about 4,300 as confirmed or potential URM buildings and another 2,200 as unknown. However, this survey was just the start of this endeavor. Washington EMD and the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP) have been working with many partners across the state to build out a more robust process, and develop the tools needed to support this, including a statewide surveying tool, and a centralized URM database.

"We don't know when the next earthquake will be, but we know these buildings will not perform well," said Riley McNabb, earthquake program outreach coordinator with WA EMD. "We want to identify them and get them seismically retrofitted to save lives and preserve these historic structures."

McNabb said the portal could be ready for public viewing at some point in 2026. Information on these buildings is still being gathered and entered.

"Seismic retrofits are expensive, so we don't we want to just present folks with a problem. We want to give them information on what to do next," she said. "We want this information on URM structures to inform and improve communities' preparedness, mitigation, and response planning."

For Pascal Schuback, the executive director of CREW, the issue of URMs on Bainbridge Island is a personal one because it's where he and his family live. He has focused his career on helping his community to be better prepared.([Opens an external site in a new window](#))

"When we know where the URMs are, we will know those buildings will likely have damage after an earthquake and we can concentrate our resources there after a disaster," he said. "On a hot sunny day on a Saturday, those buildings could all be full of people."

On Bainbridge Island, after a few hours of training, team members split up into groups and scoped out a couple of dozen potential URM buildings in downtown Bainbridge Island.

Groups inspected buildings to see if it was made with bricks, concrete blocks, hollow clay tile, stone, or of some other material. Is the building on a sloping hillside? Does the building show signs of some seismic retrofit already?

"We look to see how these buildings are being used and where there might be more risk," McNabb said. "If one URM building currently houses 30 people and another URM is a vacant building, that can inform which building a community might prioritize retrofitting first."

Groups looked for anchor plates – oftentimes decorative, floral plates called "rosettes" – as these indicate some level of seismic retrofit. They also checked to see if buildings had parapets – wall features that extend beyond a building's roofline – as these can be dangerous in an earthquake if not properly braced.

"Window arches are also a good indicator of URM construction," McNabb told volunteers. "While these arches can indicate high risk, they are also beautiful features that give buildings a lot of character."

This survey was completed entirely on the streets and sidewalks. While these surveyors aren't required to be licensed engineers, they are trained on how to identify these features beforehand, and this data will be then reviewed and verified by credentialed volunteers later.

"For CREW, we work with a lot of communities across the West Coast so a lot of communities are benefiting from this work and this environment," Schuback said. "And this is a great process to bring communities together."

Story by Steven Friederich

THE FUTURE IS HERE

NEW JOINT FORCE HEADQUARTERS
BUILDING COMING IN 2028



As shovels broke ground and dirt flew, Washington National Guard leaders marked a milestone two decades in the making, breaking ground on a new Joint Force Headquarters building at Camp Murray on March 25, 2026.

“This was a project that started all the way back in 2007, and for a time we thought we would break ground in 2013. But here we are, nearly two decades later, finally breaking ground,” said Adam Iwaszuk, director of the Construction and Facilities Management Office (CFMO). “This is a significant project because it will bring staff currently working across multiple facilities—some more than 100 years old—under one roof.”

The groundbreaking ceremony represents years of planning and a \$57.6 million investment that will result in a new Joint Force Headquarters facility for senior military leadership and staff of the Washington Military Department, the Washington Army and Air National Guard and the Joint Force Headquarters unit.

The project continues a strong partnership between the Washington Army National Guard, Air National Guard, WJA Architects and Absher Construction. In spring 2014, Absher Construction and WJA Architects broke ground on the Pierce County Readiness Center, which opened in summer 2016. The new Joint Force Headquarters building will sit adjacent to the readiness center and will be connected by a sky bridge.

“Once complete, if you had never been to Camp Murray or didn’t know the project’s history, you

would think the two buildings were constructed together, not a decade apart,” said Iwaszuk. “They will share the same exterior appearance, including brickwork, metal finishes and architectural features.”

The new facility will include a command suite, headquarters for the Air National Guard, Army National Guard staff directorates (G1, G2, G3, G4, G5, G6), a large Joint Operations Center, an auditorium, offices for the state chaplain and public affairs office, a supply area, classrooms and meeting spaces. A key feature will be the sky bridge connecting the two buildings, allowing personnel and visitors to move seamlessly between them.

“As the former Joint Operations Director, I am very excited to see everyone come together during state emergencies in the new Joint Operations Center and brief in the new auditorium,” said Brig. Gen. Paul Sellars, commanding general of the Washington Army National Guard and assistant adjutant general. “I’m also looking forward to watching this building take shape over the next few years from my current office.”

Over the past decade, the CFMO has overseen numerous construction and modernization projects across the Washington National Guard. Since 2016, new readiness centers have opened at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Camp Murray and in the cities of Tumwater and Richland. Additionally, armories and readiness centers in Anacortes, Centralia, Bremerton, Snohomish, Moses Lake and Wenatchee have been upgraded, extending the life of aging facilities.

The new Joint Force Headquarters building is projected to open in summer 2028.

194TH AIR SUPPORT OPERATIONS GROUP CUTS RIBBON ON NEW COMPLEX

“The idea of having this brand new facility for a guard installation like this is mythical,” said Col. Travis Hartzel, 194th Air Support Operations Group commander.

The 194th ASOG marked the completion of its new complex with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Camp Murray, Wash., Jan. 9, 2026.

The \$34.6 million, 56,000-square-foot facility consolidates units that were previously scattered across Camp Murray.

The process leading up to the ribbon-cutting ceremony began roughly eleven years ago, although the brainstorming behind it started years before between then Col. Jeremy Horn, 194th ASOG commander, and Col. John McKinley, 248th Civil Engineering Flight commander.

“It’s nice to start the programming of the project way back in the day for conceptual, to get it to design, and now to see it finally here,” said McKinley. “Most people don’t get to be here for cradle to grave, and I got to be here for the whole thing.”

The 194th Civil Engineering Flight oversaw the project from initial programming through construction, ensuring the contractor met the budget and quality control standards.

The complex is configured for efficient coordination and response. At its core is a large simulation area for Joint Terminal Attack Controller training. Surrounding the simulation suite are mission planning and briefing rooms. The layout allows Airmen to plan operations, rehearse, execute simulations and debrief in a single, secure environment.

Drive-through bays enable personnel to dispatch rapidly — streamlining response for domestic operations.

“If we have large-scale flooding in Washington state, for example, and we need X number of trucks and X number of folks, and then this amount of equipment,” said Hartzel. “The design of that building is to pull the truck in, load the equipment, and do your inspections. You’ve got everybody loaded up and they just drive out the other side.”

The ASOG complex will currently house the 194th ASOG, 116th Air Support Operations Squadron, 116th Combat Weather Flight and the 194th Human Performance Optimization Team. Plans are being discussed to move a component of the 242nd Combat Communications Squadron and the 194th Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations Task Force into the facility in the future.

“We can integrate our training,” said Hartzel. “If it is with the Weather Flight, if it is with the EMSO Task Force or Combat Communications, having that centralization gives us more time, which equals a more ready and highly trained force.”

As the ASOG and partner units consolidate, other squadrons and flights are relocating into the newly available space. McKinley described the project as the “first domino” in a broader reorganization that will better align facilities with unit size and mission requirements.

While the reorganization reshapes the installation, its true value lies in the people who operate from it.

“This is a team of problem solvers, and this is a team of very committed individuals, whether it is supporting operations here within the state of Washington or abroad in combat,” said Hartzel. “Ultimately, I just want to say thank you to everyone who is making this investment. You are investing in the mission, in the people of this organization, and we will not let you down.”

(Photo and Story by Jordaen Kvale)





CAMP MURRAY UNVEILS NEW BARRACKS SUPPORTING READINESS AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Soldiers, airmen and visitors now have a new place to stay on Camp Murray following the opening of newly constructed Building 66 barracks on Feb. 18, 2026. The new building is designed to support personnel attending training, on orders, for drill weekends, or visiting the installation.

“This is a significant upgrade to the 65-year-old building that was here prior,” said Mr. Adam Iwaszuk, director of the Construction Facilities Management Office. “The building was small, falling apart, insects all over, dirty and you didn’t want to stay here.”

The new building, which officially opened on Feb. 19, 2026, and already has guests reserving rooms, is a 4,000 square foot facility with 20 private rooms, private bathrooms and showers, and a common area day room. Each room provides a twin bed, coffee bar, drawers, closet, desk, television, and internet access.

“This is a great place for soldiers and airmen to come that are here for training to come back from a long day, get a hot shower, comfy bed and relax or spend time with other service members in the common area,” said Iwaszuk. Designed by KMB Architects and built by Jones & Roberts Construction, the project represents an investment in readiness for soldiers and airmen during their drill weekends and guests that come to Camp Murray for official business and leisure.

“We started this process eight years ago and to finally open this building and get our service members a quality facility to stay at a low rate is a massive win,” said Iwaszuk.

During drill weekends, units can utilize safety lodging for soldiers who live more than 50 miles from their home of record.

“We charge \$40 a night for soldiers and airmen that are on orders or at drill. That is a significant discount from the cost outside the base,” said Warrant Officer 1 Mitch Potter, the housing officer for the Washington National Guard. “Our service members will have a clean, warm, and safe place to stay while ensuring they can focus on their training.”

Designed for comfort, accessibility, and efficiency, the new lodging offers a modern home away from home, reflecting the evolving needs of today’s force while reinforcing Camp Murray’s role as a hub for joint operations and collaboration across Washington’s military community.

“We don’t just serve the Guard members though, we can also rent the rooms for leisure, official business on Camp Murray, or visiting guests who are here for conferences,” said Potter.

Reservations are available by contacting Warrant Officer 1 Mitchell Potter, by emailing, <mailto:ng.wa.waarng.mbx.opd-billeting@army.mil>.

WASHINGTON NATIONAL GUARD ROCKS 2026 “LEG DAY” AT STATE CAPITOL

Every year, the Washington’s state Legislature honors the accomplishments of the Washington National Guard during concurrent House and Senate sessions. This year, following the response to historic flooding across Western Washington, members of Washington’s state Legislature took the time to thank the Washington National Guard during annual National Guard Day at the state capitol in Olympia, Wash., Jan. 28, 2026.

“I have stood in front of this body before to talk about service It’s something that’s really important to me and so it was probably not the last time I’ll be doing it either,” said Rep. Brandy Donaghy from the 44th Legislative District in Washington. “It takes a unique kind of person to stand up and serve. It takes a willingness to go beyond yourself and think about the community and the world at large. It can be very difficult. Over the last few decades we have seen a significant increase in frequency and intensity of natural disasters across the world and while our Guard does serve overseas, one of the things that they do that is unique is they serve us here in our communities, helping us prepare for disasters, working in search and rescue during disasters, and then they’re there for the recovery.”

At the end of 2025, Donaghy’s district in Snohomish County was affected by flooding that closed roads, destroyed homes and businesses and threatened lives. National Guard members worked hard to prepare sand bags, conduct emergency evacuations, and support first responders by adding to their capabilities.

“I think it’s very important today that we remember to thank our National Guard,” added Donaghy. “All of these members who stepped up to serve our community, who are away from their families, often for long periods of time, because without them, we would be in much worse shape than we are every time a disaster strikes.”

In the Senate, where many saw or experienced firsthand the exceptional work of the Washington National Guard, those the sentiments were echoed loudly.

“The Guard is made up of civilian soldiers that stand ready 24-7 in every corner of our state, ready to respond, to protect, and serve but their mission goes far beyond defense, it’s about strength and resilience and the unwavering commitment to serve everyone,” said Sen. Deborah Krishnadasan from the 26th District. “In early December, several parts of our state experienced historic flooding and our National Guard stepped forward without hesitation to support our devastated communities. Floodwaters destroyed and damaged more than 3,800 homes, and triggered hundreds of road closures across the state. Governor Ferguson issued an emergency proclamation on December 10th and within 24 hours, our National Guard was on the ground saving lives.”

Both Sen. Claire Wilson, 30th District, and Sen. Keith Wagoner, 39th District, shared stories of how the Guard made a tremendous impact in their communities during the floods.



“Water was covering their yards and without the support of the Washington National Guard, many more folks would have been impacted. I stand not just in support of them and their families during the recent floods but for all the work they did during the pandemic,” said Wilson. Wilson’s 30th District was impacted by high waters when a levee breach occurred in the middle of the night. The Guard responded to help move people out of the impact area and assist with securing the levee.

“I want to thank the National Guard, not just for the work they did during the floods in my district, but also for the work they did during COVID in my district. It was so critical,” said Wagoner.



Along with recognizing the organization’s achievements, this year’s event provided an opportunity for legislators to hear from Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh, the adjutant general, who expressed his thanks for the support the state Legislature gives the Guard.

“We just want to say thank you for your continued support and resources to assist us in reaching our recruiting and retention goals, our grant program and just the continued support you show the organization,” said Welsh. “These folks are your Guard, we are your neighbors, your families and constituents.” (Photos by Adeline Witherspoon, Story by Joseph Siemandel)



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT DAY AT THE STATE CAPITOL 2026 SHOWCASES STATEWIDE PARTNERSHIPS

The 2026 Emergency Management Day at the State Capitol was a resounding success, highlighting the strength, diversity, and collaboration of Washington’s emergency management community. Organized by the Washington State Emergency Management Association (WSEMA), the Emergency Management Council’s legislative subcommittee, and the Military Department’s Emergency Management Division (EMD), the event drew dozens of visitors and participants from across the state.

Ten Tribal governments, 12 counties, 12 cities, and more than 15 state agencies were represented, underscoring the broad and inclusive nature of emergency management in Washington. Attendees had the opportunity to explore cutting-edge response capabilities and learn more about preparedness efforts underway in their communities.

Emergency response equipment displays were a highlight of the day. County and regional partners—including Thurston County, Snohomish County, Yakima County, Skagit County, and Lewis County—were joined by the Region 3 Incident Management Team, the Washington State Department of Corrections, and the Washington National Guard. Their displays demonstrated real-world tools and resources used during disasters, from response vehicles to mobile communications and command equipment.

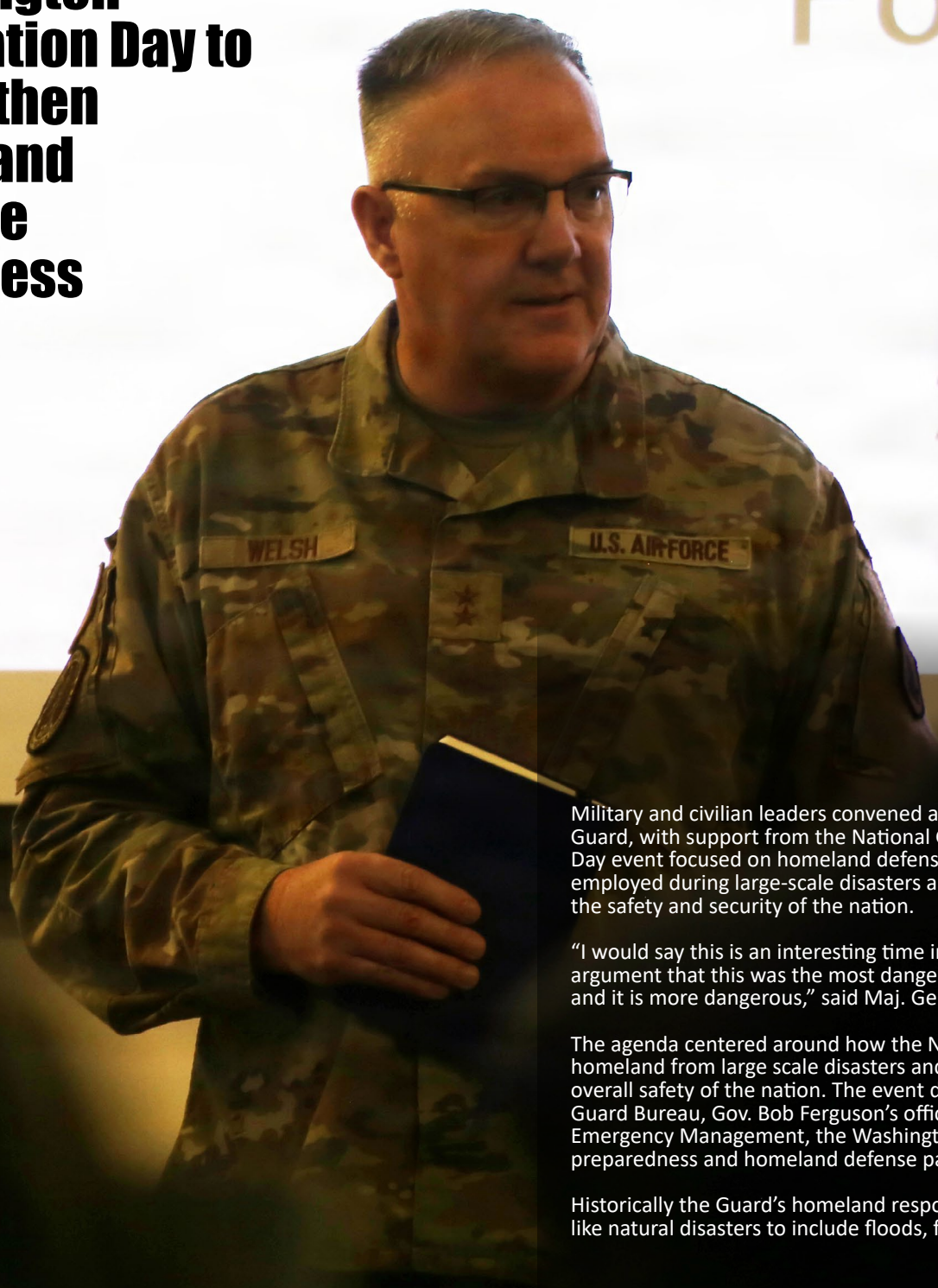
Private-sector partnership was also on display, with Verizon showcasing a satellite trailer alongside other emergency communications technologies critical to disaster response and recovery.

About 12 elected officials and legislative staff either stopped by to meet county and Tribal representatives or met with them in their offices, to ask questions and reinforce the importance of sustained investment in emergency response, preparedness, and recovery. Throughout the day, EMD staff distributed preparedness materials and engaged visitors in conversations about readiness and resilience.

Emergency Management Day at the State Capitol 2026 reinforced a clear message: strong partnerships, informed policymakers, and well-resourced responders are essential to keeping Washington communities safe. (Story by Steven Friederich)

Washington Foundation Day to Strengthen Homeland Defense Readiness

Foundation



Military and civilian leaders convened at Camp Murray on Jan. 29, 2026, as the Washington National Guard, with support from the National Guard Bureau and U.S. Northern Command, hosted a Foundation Day event focused on homeland defense. The discussion centered on how the National Guard could be employed during large-scale disasters and emerging threats, and the Guard's expanding role in ensuring the safety and security of the nation.

"I would say this is an interesting time in our country. When I applied for the TAG job and made the argument that this was the most dangerous time in my 36 years in the military, well now I am at 38 years and it is more dangerous," said Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh, the adjutant general, Washington National Guard.

The agenda centered around how the National Guard could potentially be utilized to defend the homeland from large scale disasters and unforeseen threats, as well as the role the Guard has in the overall safety of the nation. The event drew representatives from U.S. Northern Command, the National Guard Bureau, Gov. Bob Ferguson's office, the Washington National Guard, I Corps, Washington Emergency Management, the Washington State Guard, the Department of War, and multiple disaster preparedness and homeland defense partners.

Historically the Guard's homeland response missions were focused on the yearly traditional threats like natural disasters to include floods, fires, hurricanes, and snow storms. In recent years, the Guard's



homeland missions have expanded to defending against cyber threats, pandemic response and assisting with voting center protection. That doesn't even account for potential outsider threats from other nation states and the use of foreign objects like drones.

"The idea of foundation day came up only about six months ago, but NORTHCOM knew looking at the current environment that they needed to start working through the problems early," said Mike Holly, a former North Dakota National Guardsman that now works with Northern Command in the Joint intelligence office. "You guys have a luxury that other states do not when you are thinking about large scale devastating domestic operations response, with this thing called the Cascadia Subduction Zone, that would be a large scale disaster you have already been planning for. So you guys have already started thinking about the worst case scenarios for a while."

National Guard Bureau and NORTHCOM have been partnering for some time in this environment, looking at large scale disasters.

"A few years ago we started the dual status commander program," said Holly.

A dual status commander is an officer of the Army National Guard (ARNG), Air National Guard (ANG), or a commissioned officer of the Regular Army or Regular Air Force who has completed specialized training and certification. DSCs are jointly managed by the commander of U.S. Northern Command and the chief of the National Guard Bureau and may, by law, serve in two statuses (federal and state) simultaneously. The president and the governor of the state must both agree to the establishment of a DSC. DSC appointment can be terminated by the Secretary of War or the governor at any time. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), signed in December 2011, facilitated the use of DSCs to provide unity of effort between state and federal forces in achieving common objectives in a disaster response or in supporting a national event.

The speakers at Foundation Day have long been engaged in homeland defense efforts. One of the key speakers was retired Gen. Frank Grass, the 27th Chief of the National Guard, who served from 2012 to 2016. During his tenure as chief, Grass drew on his experience as the former deputy commander of U.S. Northern Command to strengthen the Guard's role in disaster response and domestic security, elevate the Guard as an operational force, align training and equipment standards with active components, modernize the force, and expand cyber capabilities across the National Guard.

"While we are kind of at the starting point with this, we do have the right people in the room for the conversations," said Grass.

Another speaker, Dr. John Garver, shared his knowledge and expertise on the emerging threats and why events like Foundation Day are so critical to national security.

"We call this foundation day because it is focused on laying the foundation of how these events go, so when a situation happens we already have a start point. It is important to build relationships and trust with each other," said Garver. "The most important part of the day is actually the conversations that are happening among us."

Ultimately foundation day is focused on giving participants a chance to discuss homeland defense and resiliency within their state, as well as facilitate a common understanding of definitions, topics and issues. It also reinforces doctrine and that in any disaster, the governor and adjutant general are the starting point.

"In Washington we are hyper vigilant and hyper-sensitive to what is happening with the military within our states. So I want us to think through these things as we set the foundation for our guard," said Welsh.



WASHINGTON NATIONAL GUARD STRENGTHENS COUNTER-UAS READINESS AHEAD OF WORLD CUP 2026

With millions of soccer fans set to descend on the Pacific Northwest for the FIFA World Cup 2026, the Washington National Guard and public safety leaders are preparing for the potential of drones getting in the wrong hands.

On Feb. 11, 2026, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the Washington National Guard supported a FIFA Field Ready Range Day focused on countering unmanned aerial system (UAS) threats. The training brought together military, law enforcement, and interagency partners to sharpen their ability to detect, track, and respond to potentially hostile drones ahead of major international events, including multiple World Cup matches scheduled in Seattle.

"I spent the last two years as the I Corps chief of staff and I have been all over the Pacific Theater trying to ensure readiness for large-scale combat operations," said Col. Phillip Lamb, senior army advisor for the Washington National Guard. "And what I've come to determine is that we've defined readiness improperly up until this point in time. What we're doing here now is the future of real readiness."

Lamb believes events like these are promoting the next level of readiness.

"As you look at defense of the homeland as the priority for this administration and for the Department of War, what we're doing out here is the beginning of generating real readiness to defend critical infrastructure, like installations and ports, from flying unmanned systems while defending and protecting critical war fighting functions," Lamb continued. "This is now becoming the priority of effort in what we really mean when we talk about generating readiness."

The event built on momentum from a Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems Summit hosted by the Washington National Guard in November, which examined drone threats during large-scale public gatherings. Discussions during the February training reinforced the Guard's role in supporting civil authorities, particularly in detection and monitoring, while operating within federal and state legal frameworks.

Those legal authorities were also a focus during recent testimony before state legislators, where National Guard leaders spoke in support of House Bill 2462. The bill is designed to clarify how the National Guard and Washington State Guard can assist law enforcement in responding to credible drone threats.

"It allows the governor, through the adjutant general, to set clear rules for how agencies respond to drone threats and authorizes the governor to use the National Guard to support law enforcement when needed," said Lt. Col. Denny Frey, the adjutant general's command action group lead. "In short, it improves coordination, closes capability gaps, and gives the state additional tools to protect the public."

During the Range Day event, National Guard subject-matter experts outlined how counter-UAS support typically works during major events. Local law enforcement agencies remain responsible for establishing Temporary Flight Restrictions through the Federal Aviation Administration, while requests for National Guard assistance are coordinated through the State Emergency Operations Center.

"The primary role of the National Guard during these missions is detection and monitoring of potentially hazardous drones," said Lt. Col. Wes Watson, former commander of the 10th Civil Support Team. "That capability is critical when local agencies are stretched or facing a complex threat environment."

The 10th CST has extensive experience supporting large-scale public events across the region, regularly working alongside Seattle Police and Fire Departments at professional sporting events and concerts at Lumen Field. That established relationship, officials say, will be essential as planning accelerates for World Cup security operations.

As drone technology becomes more accessible and adaptable, Washington National Guard leaders emphasized that training events like FIFA Range Days are vital to staying ahead of potential threats.

"We're using FIFA as an example, as a springboard to generate that readiness. But there are other events coming up, like with Los Angeles hosting the Olympics in 2028," said Lamb. "Defense of critical infrastructure around the entirety of this nation is so important and we are in the business of making sure that we can protect the homeland."

WASHINGTON NATIONAL GUARD HOSTS ANNUAL TRIBAL POLICE LEADERSHIP & COUNTERDRUG CONFERENCE



With a focus on increasing public safety and reducing the availability of illegal drugs in Washington Tribes, the Washington National Guard's Counterdrug Program held its annual Tribal Police Leadership & Counterdrug Conference March 10–11, 2026, at the Thurston County Readiness Center in Tumwater, Wash.

"This brings the tribal chiefs of police together with our counterdrug team to brief them on the resources we can bring to the fight on drug enforcement and strengthen connections with the Attorney General's office and other partners," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Bill Elliott, tribal liaison with the Washington Military Department and organizer of the event. "What started as a one-time event has now become annual, with funding from the Tribal Opioid Task Force so it costs the Guard nothing to participate."

Leaders from the Washington National Guard Counterdrug Program joined tribal, state, and federal law enforcement for two days of collaboration, information sharing, and professional development aimed at strengthening counterdrug efforts and public safety in tribal communities. The conference also addressed cross-jurisdictional coordination and explored training and policy initiatives impacting tribal law enforcement.

The opioid and illegal drug crisis continues to disproportionately affect Washington Tribes. While statewide overdose numbers began to decline slightly in early 2024, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities still face the highest rates of drug-induced fatalities in the state—158 per 100,000 residents, nearly four times higher than the state average.

“Most tribes have limited resources, so events like this are a godsend,” said Elliott. “They learn about available resources like aviation support for large areas such as Colville and Yakima, and training that can be delivered regionally despite limited budgets.”

Col. Craig Broyles, commander of the Washington National Guard Counterdrug Program, opened the conference highlighting the importance of partnerships.

“We are committed to supporting each other through this crisis, and we always have room to improve,” Broyles said. “Our goal is to provide the best support possible, especially as we combat the opioid and fentanyl crisis impacting families and communities across our state.”

Throughout the two days, guest speakers emphasized collaboration between tribal nations and federal, state, and local agencies. Subject matter experts provided updates on operational resources, including intelligence, analytical, and investigative support. Presentations also covered unmanned aerial systems for law enforcement, counter-UAS considerations, and regional intelligence resources through the Washington State Fusion Center and the FBI.

Washington State Attorney General Nick Brown encouraged tribal leaders to leverage his office’s resources.

“Events like these help strengthen ties and support safety in our tribal communities,” Brown said. “We want to be part of the solution, so please reach out to our office.”

Afternoon sessions explored prosecutorial and operational perspectives. U.S. Attorney’s Office representatives reviewed federal drug prosecution guidelines affecting tribal jurisdictions, while the Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program shared current trafficking trends and prevention strategies. The Tulalip Tribal Police Department concluded the day with a case study on complex drug investigations.

Sgt. 1st Class Scott Salmon, illicit substances instructor at the Western Regional Counterdrug Training Center, highlighted the educational value of the event. “We teach

law enforcement about safety and hazard mitigation around synthetic opioids and clandestine drug environments. Conferences like these help tribes with their counterdrug efforts and provide opportunities to generate leads and instructional outreach.”

On the second day, discussions broadened to public safety initiatives, legislative developments, and national programs supporting AMBER Alert in Indian Country. Bureau of Indian Affairs representatives highlighted cross-deputation authorities, funding, and programs for tribal policing, while experts addressed Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) initiatives and cold case support.

Professional development opportunities were also highlighted, including Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers programs and key legislative frameworks like the Tribal Warrants Act, Tribal Law and Order Act, and the proposed Tribal Law Enforcement Parity Act.

Throughout the conference, leaders emphasized that effective counterdrug operations rely on sustained partnerships, shared intelligence, and access to modern training and resources. The event provided a forum for tribal law enforcement to exchange best practices, build professional networks, and develop collaborative solutions.

By the end of the two-day conference, participants had strengthened relationships across agencies and reaffirmed their commitment to protecting tribal communities and disrupting drug trafficking networks.

“We are here together, united in this fight, with the shared goal of supporting each other in tackling this crisis,” said Broyles. “I look forward to our continued work together.”

Story and Photos by Joseph Siemandel





EXERCISE COBRA GOLD 2026
CAMP RED HORSE, THAILAND



Cobra Gold 2026 Demonstrates Multinational Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Story by Joseph Siemandel, Photo by Bianca Hayden

When disaster happens and lives are in danger, time is maybe the most critical asset first responders have.

“We train together, (so) we can respond together swiftly, safely, and respectively, supporting Thai authorities and local communities when called,” said U.S. Army Maj. Gen. William Prendergrast, Commander, 40th Infantry Division, California Army National Guard.

U.S. joint services and partners from the Royal Thai Armed Forces and Bangkok Fire and Rescue Department conducted a humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) demonstration during Exercise Cobra Gold 2026 at the Disaster Relief Training Centre, Phanom Sarakham District, Chachoengsao, Thailand, Feb. 27, 2026.

“Cobra Gold demonstrates our enduring partnership with the Kingdom of Thailand and our collective commitment to readiness and life-saving humanitarian cooperation. Today’s HADR demonstration embodies that commitment,” said Prendergrast. “What we saw today is joint search and rescue teams, medical partners,, and civil-military

coordination, which reflects practical training that will save lives if and when disaster strikes.”

The humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) component of Exercise Cobra Gold 2026 is designed to sharpen the ability of multinational forces to respond quickly and effectively to real-world crises. The seven fully participating nations in Cobra Gold 26, United States, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Republic of Korea, conducted combine planning and field drills that emphasize coordination, information sharing, and operational awareness during disasters. A centerpiece of this effort is the HADR Demonstration, where forces operate side by side in realistic scenarios such as search-and-rescue, medical response, and urgent life-saving support.

For U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Ricky Manglona, 420th Chemical Battalion, Washington Army National Guard, training in Thailand during these events are more than just a job, it’s more like making sure his family is getting assistance when they need it.

“Every time we come and train with the Thais, it’s like seeing our extended family again, like coming over for a holiday or family coming back together,” said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Ricky Manglona, 420th Chemical Battalion, Washington Army National Guard. “So we exchange our stories, like where we’ve been, what we’ve been doing, and then we catch up pretty quick. We work as a team because we train the same, they know the U.S. standards and we know the Thai standards.”

He was just one of the U.S. Soldiers and Airmen who participated in a joint-entry, hazmat response with Bangkok Fire and Rescue Department, the Washington National Guard Homeland Response Force, and the Washington National Guard Civil Support Team.

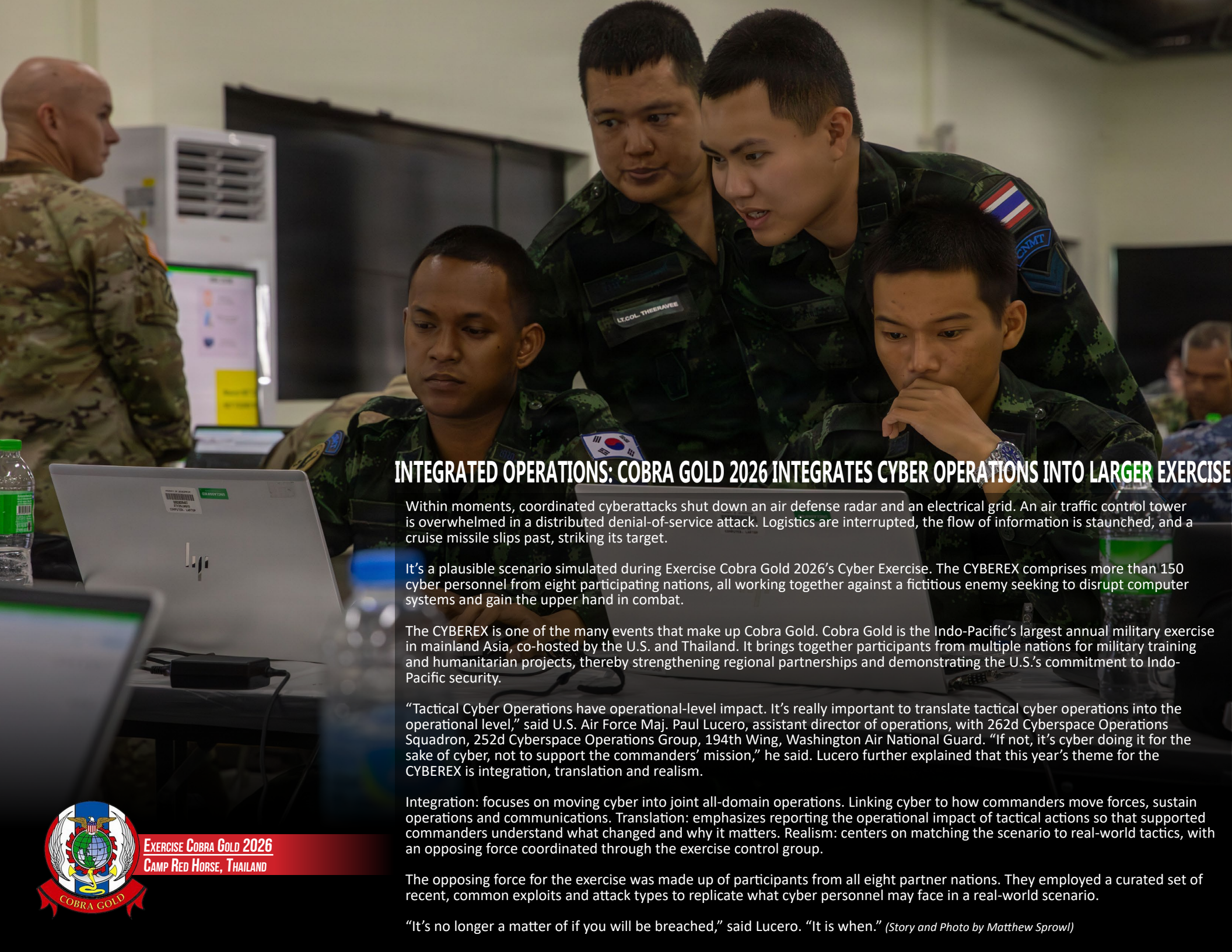
U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Kristen Retherford, 10th Civil Support Team, Washington National Guard was one of the lead planners and first participants to make entry into the obstacle during the demonstration. Her training and experience with the 10th Civil Support Team prepared her to work side-by-side with the Bangkok Fire and Rescue Department.

“The basics of HAZMAT and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear response are the same no matter who is conducting the mission. So whether it is a commercial vehicle spill or leak from a weapon of mass destruction response, the basics are the same,” said Retherford. “You have to assess the situation, detect and monitor for any hazards, and make decisions from there to save lives.”

The HADR demonstration places strong emphasis on integrating specialized search and rescue units, including teams with search and rescue dogs, trained to locate survivors in complex environments. In parallel, Cobra Gold 2026 incorporates simulated evacuation and emergency operations, including a medical response, allowing multinational teams to rehearse the safe movement of civilians from crisis areas to secure locations.

Just as important, the HADR training strengthened relationships between military forces and civilian emergency responders, ensuring smoother coordination during floods, earthquakes, and other large-scale humanitarian crises.

“We build that continuity, we build those relationships and work together to get better and learn,” said Manglona. “Bangkok Fire and Rescue Department, they’re like the best premier firefighters in Thailand. Hands down, they’re just the best and I learn a lot from them every time I come here.”



INTEGRATED OPERATIONS: COBRA GOLD 2026 INTEGRATES CYBER OPERATIONS INTO LARGER EXERCISE

Within moments, coordinated cyberattacks shut down an air defense radar and an electrical grid. An air traffic control tower is overwhelmed in a distributed denial-of-service attack. Logistics are interrupted, the flow of information is stanchied, and a cruise missile slips past, striking its target.

It's a plausible scenario simulated during Exercise Cobra Gold 2026's Cyber Exercise. The CYBEREX comprises more than 150 cyber personnel from eight participating nations, all working together against a fictitious enemy seeking to disrupt computer systems and gain the upper hand in combat.

The CYBEREX is one of the many events that make up Cobra Gold. Cobra Gold is the Indo-Pacific's largest annual military exercise in mainland Asia, co-hosted by the U.S. and Thailand. It brings together participants from multiple nations for military training and humanitarian projects, thereby strengthening regional partnerships and demonstrating the U.S.'s commitment to Indo-Pacific security.

"Tactical Cyber Operations have operational-level impact. It's really important to translate tactical cyber operations into the operational level," said U.S. Air Force Maj. Paul Lucero, assistant director of operations, with 262d Cyberspace Operations Squadron, 252d Cyberspace Operations Group, 194th Wing, Washington Air National Guard. "If not, it's cyber doing it for the sake of cyber, not to support the commanders' mission," he said. Lucero further explained that this year's theme for the CYBEREX is integration, translation and realism.

Integration: focuses on moving cyber into joint all-domain operations. Linking cyber to how commanders move forces, sustain operations and communications. Translation: emphasizes reporting the operational impact of tactical actions so that supported commanders understand what changed and why it matters. Realism: centers on matching the scenario to real-world tactics, with an opposing force coordinated through the exercise control group.

The opposing force for the exercise was made up of participants from all eight partner nations. They employed a curated set of recent, common exploits and attack types to replicate what cyber personnel may face in a real-world scenario.

"It's no longer a matter of if you will be breached," said Lucero. "It is when." (Story and Photo by Matthew Sprowl)



EXERCISE COBRA GOLD 2026
CAMP RED HORSE, THAILAND

FULL-CIRCLE LEADERSHIP

CSM Andrew Larkin returns to Exercise Cobra Gold - 25 years later

More than 25 years ago, a bright-eyed Pfc. Andrew Larkin saw the sprawling city of Pattaya and took a deep breath of salty air, laying eyes on the ocean.

“Walking the streets of Pattaya made me feel really, really small. The first time I had ever seen the ocean was in Thailand,” says Larkin.

Larkin hails from a small town in Colorado, where his family has a long history of military service dating back to the Civil War. His father was a wheeled vehicle mechanic, so Larkin chose to follow in his footsteps.

He enlisted with the 520th Infantry Battalion and shortly after went to Exercise Cobra Gold in 1998. Although his interactions with the Royal Thai Armed Forces were limited, he recognized it was important work.

“It’s like, the stars have aligned. I once supported that unit as a wheeled vehicle mechanic. Now I’m supporting that unit as their command sergeant major,” he said.

Now, Command Sgt. Maj. Andrew Larkin serves as the senior enlisted advisor, 96th Troop Command, Washington Army National Guard, and the 10th Homeland Response Force. Ensuring operations run smoothly at Exercise Cobra Gold 2026 in the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command. He works in unison with the Royal Thai Armed forces and other partner nations.

“Look around you; we are in full co. ration with our Thai counterparts,” says Larkin, “Sometimes we need to back away and allow our counterparts to be uncomfortable.”

Larkin navigates complex situations through multiple planning sessions with both Thailand and partner nations showcasing what makes Cobra Gold such an important event.

“It’s truly both combined and joint,” says Larkin. “Being able to expand that across the world is a unique opportunity.”

For Larkin, Cobra Gold 1998 opened his eyes and expanded his worldview. Today, he sees it as an opportunity to prove unity and cooperation between partner nations. The attitudes and perceptions soldiers take from this exercise shape their experiences.

“I want Soldiers and families back home to understand that Cobra Gold is more than just training overseas. It strengthens one of our longest-standing alliances in the Indo-Pacific and ensures that, if called upon, we can operate effectively together,” said Larkin. “For our Soldiers, it’s a leadership laboratory. For our nation, it’s a signal of commitment. For our Allies, it’s proof that partnership matters.” *(Story and Photo by Zach Cunningham)*



EXERCISE COBRA GOLD 2026
CAMP RED HORSE, THAILAND





EXERCISE COBRA GOLD 2026
CAMP RED HORSE, THAILAND

PUBLIC AFFAIRS TEAMS SHARE THE STORY OF EXERCISE COBRA GOLD 2026



While forces train together on the ground, in the air, and at sea, a different kind of team works behind the scenes, telling the story of Exercise Cobra Gold 2026, the Combined Joint Information Bureau (CJIB).

The CJIB, a media hub set up to support an operation or exercise staffed by Public Affairs Office (PAO) teams from multiple nations and services, plays a vital role in supporting the success of Cobra Gold, one of the largest and longest running multinational military exercises hosted annually by the Royal Thai Armed Forces and the United States Indo-Pacific Command.

“Working alongside other PAO teams enhances our information sharing and strengthens our partnerships with other countries,” said Maj. Sarah Taylor, deputy director of the CJIB and executive officer of the 122nd Theater Public Affairs Support Element, 56th Theater Information Operations Group.

In the first five days, the CJIB cleared an estimated 500 pieces of product, and escorted 70 members of the media on four different missions to support the transparent information dissemination of the exercise.

A knowledgeable well-integrated CJIB brings together diverse expertise, shared experience, and established professional relationships that streamline planning, information sharing, and decision-making processes.

“It’s helpful to work with more countries, I learn a lot,” said Lt. JG Napassakorn Tipso, assistant spokesperson for the Royal Thai Navy and CJIB member. “We are a small team, you’re a bigger one, so working together lets us share our experience, create videos together as a team and make great memories.”

By collaborating closely with military and civilian representatives from multiple partner nations, PAO personnel gain a deeper understanding of the exercise’s objectives, cultural considerations, and strategic communication priorities.

“We have public affairs and combat camera professionals from all branches of services and our partners, telling the story of Cobra Gold,” said Lt. Col. Joseph Siemandel, CJIB director and commander of the 122nd Theater Public Affairs Support Element, 56th Theater Information Operations Group. “This is such a great environment to learn new skills, develop relationships and come together to improve our career field.”

Exercise Cobra Gold 2026 features the largest and most diverse CJIB team in recent years, with military and civilian representatives from the United States, Thailand, Japan, Australia, and Singapore. This multinational environment fosters collaboration, mutual learning, and a unified approach to strategic messaging.

Through this collaborative framework, PAO teams refine their skills in delivering clear, coordinated, and transparent communication. The CJIB’s strengthened structure ensures that every message reflects the shared goals of the participating nations by capturing the training, teamwork, and commitment of each nation involved in the exercise.

“Having this collaborative environment with other nations builds our relationships, hones our skills, and betters the future of Cobra Gold,” said Taylor, who is supporting her third Cobra Gold.

The story of Cobra Gold is shared with accuracy and purpose by the CJIB. Their work highlights more than military capability; it reflects trust, partnership, and a unified commitment to regional security, leaving a legacy that endures long after the exercise concludes.

(Story and Photo by Bianca Hayden)



NEVER MET A CHALLENGE HE CAN'T BEAT

U.S. Army Officer Candidate Leslie Dela Cruz doesn't run away from a challenge. From leaving the Philippines at 18 to build a life in the United States on his own, to taking on Officer Candidate School at age 37, he consistently seeks out opportunities for personal and professional growth.

"My next mountain to climb," Dela Cruz said.

Officer Candidate School (OCS) Phase III, hosted by the 2nd Battalion, 205th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, Washington National Guard (2/205th RTI), tests officer candidates' leadership competencies and tactical decision-making skills before they commission as second lieutenants. Dela Cruz credits his wife and young kids, ages four and one, as the biggest motivation in his pursuit of something greater in his Army career.

"I'm doing it for them," Dela Cruz said, talking about his family. "After I made E-7, I felt like I needed to do more."

The program itself is rigorous, and the transition from the enlisted ranks can be difficult to manage. Dela Cruz navigates that challenge by building a personal relationship with every team member he's worked with since Phase Zero, which started nearly a year ago, leading with kindness and empathy..

"I'm excited to assist them," Dela Cruz said. "Being able to help and contribute to their 'go's' is a big thing for me."

Phase III of the program brings together candidates from eight different states. For most, that would present a hurdle, but Dela Cruz's demeanor bridges the gap. Observing his squad, one wouldn't guess that these candidates only met a week ago.

"He serves as an excellent example for the rest of the team," said Kyle Haston, an officer candidate from Oregon in Dela Cruz's squad. "He's very knowledgeable. He's a great leader. He never misses anything. And when he's a follower, he doesn't step on your toes and lead for you. He's very inspiring. He's very friendly, and I would love to have him as a leader in the future."

Dela Cruz also caught the attention of Capt. Chelsey Downer, an OCS cadre from Michigan. Though she has only been part of Dela Cruz's training since the start of Phase III, his role as an anchor for his squad truly stood out to her.

"He draws on his previous experiences," Downer said. "But also his attitude. Even in the middle of 'the suck,' when it's raining, gross, and nasty, he's just always smiling and trying to pump everybody up."

The Washington cadre has watched Dela Cruz's dedication to learning and adapting since the beginning of his journey.

"He knows what it takes to get the job done," said Sgt. 1st Class Dylan Warburton. "I've seen him transform from enlisted to officer. He's a wonderful follower. He's a wonderful team player. He's a wonderful leader."

Dela Cruz's commitment to camaraderie is reflected in his deep devotion to family — both the one he comes from and the one he builds in uniform. Leaders like him are the driving force behind OCS, bringing the U.S. Army Officer Corps decisive leadership, diversity of experience, and trust. Approaching each challenge with intention, he carries a message for everyone following behind him.

"If I can do it, you can do it." (Story and Photo by Reyfield Betz)

CPTCON 2026

Digital Vigilance
Operational Dominance



ANG FIRST: 194TH WING HOSTS CYBER PROTECTION TEAM CONFERENCE

The 194th Wing made history by becoming the first Air National Guard wing to host the Cyber Protection Team Conference, a meeting of military and civilian cyber protection professionals, at the Pierce County Readiness Center on Camp Murray, Wash., Feb. 23-27, 2026.

The conference was spearheaded by the 143rd and 262nd Cyber Operations Squadrons.

"[Hosting the event is] a huge win for not only for the Washington Air Guard, but the Air [National] Guard as a whole," said U.S. Air Force Capt. Kendall Dyson, one of the lead event planners who formerly served with the 143rd COS and is currently with the 960th Operations Support Squadron.

Dyson stressed the importance of using the week-long event to build relationships across units to enhance total force capabilities to aid in the protection of national security.

CPTCON was previously an annual event hosted by active-duty units but had not been held in several years. Dyson explained that he and the other lead event planner, U.S. Air Force Capt. Daniel Van Dyke, chief of training for the 262nd COS, saw an opportunity to bring the event back due to the increase of cyber protection teams within the Air National Guard.

"[Cyber protection] is a growing mission set, in fact, it's the fastest growing mission set in the Air National Guard," said Dyson. "We have about four more states that are standing up cyber protection teams in the next four years."

"We have probably four or five new [Air National Guard] units that are changing from their old mission set to cyber," Van Dyke said. "These new units are now building connections through this community and helping to get their feet under them."

According to Van Dyke the conference hosted over 40 training sessions, as well as breakout groups focusing on elements like leadership operations, intelligence, and weapons and tactics. Roughly 165 attendees representing 45 different organizations attended, including all Air Force components and representatives from the Army, Space Force, National Security Agency and others.

Dyson believes that this year's event will drive collaboration and innovation for cyber protection units moving forward.

"The big picture is we as the cyber protection team are much more focused, much more standardized, and much more efficient," said Dyson. "We're also creating better partnerships in the cyber community, and through these partnerships, we can greatly expand the capabilities of defensive cyber, which is ultimately aiding in the protection of national security." *(Story and Photo by Dustin Jeffords)*



U.S. Soldiers with the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Washington National Guard, pose for a photo with Command Sgt. Maj. Brandt Gibbons, Command Sgt. Maj. of the Washington National Guard, after earning first and second place for Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year during the Best Warrior Competition at Yakima Training Center, Wash., March 8, 2026. The competition tested each contestant on their physical and tactical capabilities and challenged their mental fortitude through a series of demanding events. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Abigail Clark)



FINDING STILLNESS IN THE RANKS: INSIDE CPT PAULA RAMIREZ'S SOUND BATH SESSIONS

The room was quiet in a way that felt unfamiliar for a military building. Fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead. Boots shuffled as Soldiers settled onto wrestling mats and cots. A few crossed their arms at first. Others closed their eyes almost immediately. No one was required to speak. No one was required to explain anything.

In a corner of the room, crystal singing bowls were arranged in a semicircle. CPT Paula Ramirez, commander of RRB A Co., Washington Army National Guard, took a slow breath before gently striking the first bowl. The tone lingered in the air.

I had spoken with CPT Ramirez earlier about how she began facilitating sound bath sessions for her Soldiers, but observing one firsthand was something entirely different. What I witnessed was not a performance or presentation, it was regulation. It was stillness. And in many ways, it was leadership expressed without rank.

About a year and a half ago, one of her Soldiers returned from deployment to what she described as “a series of devastating life events”, infidelity, divorce, and a suicide attempt.

“I had never witnessed such a drastic change in someone’s physiology and presence,” she said. “His blue eyes were dark in a way I had never seen before. I remember thinking, something is deeply wrong here.”

He was still experiencing suicidal ideation when he returned to work.

“In that moment, my title didn’t matter,” she told me. “I didn’t approach him with my rank, but as a human being who saw another human being in crisis.”

Knowing that becoming a licensed therapist would take years, CPT Ramirez began researching complementary approaches that could support nervous system regulation alongside clinical care. She discovered research on

rhythm, vibration, and sound, and began with something she already owned: a Native American drum. With the Soldier’s consent, she created a quiet space, lit a candle, and began drumming in a slow, steady rhythm. After that first session, he rested for over an hour.

“When he woke up, he said it was the most peace he had ever felt in his life,” she said.

They continued meeting weekly. Over time, she watched him stabilize and reconnect with himself. Other Soldiers noticed the change and began asking questions. Eventually, more asked to participate, including senior NCOs and officers.

Drumming one-on-one became physically demanding, so she transitioned to crystal singing bowls and structured sound baths, allowing her to support multiple Soldiers at once. The sessions are optional. Soldiers can participate fully, sit quietly, or continue working. There is no pressure and no requirement to share personal experiences.

As I observed the session, I saw what she had described to me earlier.

“I’m watching their nervous systems,” she said during our interview. “Early on, I see shallow breathing, restlessness, tension. As the session unfolds, I look for softening, slower breath, relaxed posture, deep sighs.”

Within minutes, the shift was visible. Shoulders dropped. Hands unclenched. One Soldier who had been fidgeting at the start sat completely still. Another exhaled deeply, as if releasing something he had been holding for weeks. At one point, the room felt different, heavier at first, then noticeably lighter.

“There’s often a moment when the room becomes quieter, both externally and internally,” CPT Ramirez explained. “It feels like everyone drops into the same rhythm.”

Sitting in that space, I understood what she meant. The bowls’ tones overlapped and resonated, filling the room without overwhelming it. There was no conversation, yet the atmosphere felt collective, as if, for a brief period, no one was carrying their stress alone.

After the session ended, Soldiers rose slowly. Some stretched. A few remained seated for an extra moment before standing. Most did not say much immediately. That, CPT Ramirez told me, is common.

“Later, they’ll be the first ones to show up to the next session,” she said. “The experience usually speaks for itself.”

Soldiers have reported leaving sessions feeling as if they had just awakened from a deep, restorative sleep. Some describe feeling lighter. Others say it gives them a mental reset before returning to the demands of the day. One comment that has stayed with her: “I didn’t realize how tense I was until I wasn’t anymore.”

For the Soldier who first inspired this work, the change was profound. At the time, he described relief from the emotional weight associated with suicidal ideation and moments of clarity that allowed him to begin forgiving himself. Today, she shared, he is doing very well.

CPT Ramirez frames the practice not as alternative therapy, but as readiness.

“A regulated nervous system supports focus, decision-making, and recovery,” she said. “When it’s framed that way, it aligns with mission effectiveness.”

She also connects the sessions to spiritual readiness and overall wellness in alignment with FM 7-22. When senior leaders began attending, she said, their presence signaled legitimacy.

“It showed Soldiers that leadership values wellness, not just endurance.”

As an observer in that room, what stood out most to me was how this work has shaped her leadership.

“It has made me more patient and more observant,” she said. “I lead with a deeper awareness that behavior is often communication.”

She described noticing when a Soldier appears disengaged, frequently absent, or unlike their usual self. Instead of reacting immediately, she slows down.

“I see it as a cue that something deeper may be going on,” she said. “I create space for conversation, support, and accountability rooted in care.”

Her understanding of resilience has evolved.

“Resilience isn’t about pushing harder,” she told me. “It’s about knowing when to pause and reset.”

Before the session I observed, the room carried the quiet hum of a typical duty day. Afterward, there was something else, not dramatic or emotional, but steadier. Regulated. Focused.

CPT Ramirez hopes Soldiers leave knowing they are supported without having to explain or relive their experiences.

“Most of all, I hope they know they are genuinely cared for,” she said. “Not as assets or outputs, but as people.”

In a profession where toughness and endurance are often the standard, CPT Ramirez is broadening what strength looks like. Within her formation, strength is not only about pushing through, but also about awareness, regulation, and intentional recovery.

Sometimes, it starts with something as simple as allowing Soldiers the space to close their eyes, take a steady breath, and let their nervous systems reset even if just for a few moments. *(Story and Photo by Kristen Schuler)*



U.S. Soldiers with 898 Brigade Engineer Battalion, 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Washington National Guard, salute during the national anthem at Camp Murray, Wash., on March 7, 2026. The 898th BEB was first constituted on Sep. 1, 1995 and was deactivated as part of the Washington Army National Guard's ongoing reorganization.

(U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Remi Milsagle)