

Illinois National Guard

Prairie Sentinel

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Take it From the Top:

Senior Leaders' Corner

Force Structure Decisions Reshapes How Illinois National Guard is Organized, Equipped, Postured

To the Soldiers, Airmen, Families, civilian employees of the Illinois National Guard, and the professionals of the Illinois Department of Military Affairs:

The Illinois National Guard is entering a period of significant but necessary change.

Across our formation, force structure decisions directed by the Department of War are reshaping how the National Guard is organized, equipped, and postured for the future fight. These changes are designed to ensure we remain ready, relevant, and capable against emerging threats in increasingly complex operational environments. They reflect a broader shift across the force toward mobility, sustainment, reconnaissance, information advantage, electromagnetic warfare, command and control, and long-range effects. As warfare changes, we must change with it.

For the Illinois Air National Guard, these changes are significant, but they also position our Airmen for the future.

At the 182nd Airlift Wing, the modernization of the C-130 fleet represents far more than a routine aircraft replacement. The C-130J brings increased range, higher maximum takeoff weight, improved efficiency, and reduced crew requirements compared with earlier models, while preserving the tactical airlift mission that remains essential to both federal and state operations. It retains the ability to operate from austere and unimproved airfields, deliver personnel and cargo, conduct airdrop missions, support aeromedical evacuation, and respond to domestic emergencies. This modernization strengthens Illinois' ability to move forces, equipment, and relief supplies farther, faster, and with greater flexibility in contested environments and during disaster response at home.

At the 183rd Wing, the deactivation of the Central Repair Facility came as no surprise. It was a temporary mission that lasted more than 20 years. I am working with the Air National Guard leaders to find a suitable follow-on mission that will position the Wing for relevancy well into the future. The loss of the CRF mission does not diminish the importance of the wing's remaining mission set. The 183rd Air Operations Group remains a vital capability for the Illinois Air National Guard and the broader Air Force. The group runs an Air Operations Center, which serves as the senior agency of an Air Force component commander for planning, directing, and controlling major air operations. That is a high-value command-and-control mission requiring highly skilled Airmen and directly aligned with the way the joint force must operate in modern conflict.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, Adjutant General of Illinois, and Commander of the Illinois National Guard

At the 126th Air Refueling Wing, we will continue competing for the new KC-46 aircraft while preparing the infrastructure required to support it. The 126th's primary mission remains providing air refueling support to Air Force major commands, the joint force, and allied nations wherever needed. Illinois has already been investing in the future of that mission through planning for new hangar infrastructure designed to support possible KC-46 stationing. If Illinois secures that aircraft, the KC-46 would provide greater refueling, cargo, and aeromedical evacuation capability than the KC-135, along with improved survivability and flexibility in contested environments.

For the Illinois Army National Guard, these changes include the conversion of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team to a Mobile Brigade Combat Team, the inactivation of the historic 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment, the inactivation of the 6th Battalion, 54th Security Forces Assistance Brigade, the inactivation of the 1965th Contracting Team, and the inactivation of G Co., 111th Aviation. Both C Co., 260th Military Intelligence and C Co., 341st Military Intelligence Battalion will be inactivated to help make way for the new 217th Electronics Warfare Battalion.

We will also inactivate the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion. However, we were awarded a Combat Engineer Company - Mobile. That formation is

largely combat engineers and totals more than 150 authorizations. We will inactivate D Co. the 766 BEB's military intelligence unit, but then activate the 33rd Military Intelligence Company, which has identical force structure.

The Illinois Army National Guard is restructuring many of our military intelligence units to better position us to adapt to anticipated changes in the overall Army military intelligence force structure.

As part of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team conversion, Illinois is also set to be fielded a Multi-Functional Reconnaissance Company. That company will add a modern capability designed to give improved reconnaissance and more responsive lethal and non-lethal effects. Its projected force structure includes an Effects Platoon and a Reconnaissance Platoon staffed by Infantry Soldiers, an Electromagnetic Warfare Platoon, and a Tactical Unmanned Aircraft System Platoon. In practical terms, that formation is built to provide command and control for reconnaissance and strike assets, including manned and unmanned platforms, indirect fire integration, and loitering munition support, while helping answer the commander's priority intelligence requirements and enabling action against priority targets. Stationing for that company has not yet been determined.

We also have competed for a Tactical Combat Force Infantry Battalion. These organizations exist to support Maneuver Enhancement Brigades (MEB), however it is a stand-alone Mobile Infantry Battalion with the same organizational structure and mission essential tasks as an Infantry battalion in a Mobile Brigade.

In addition, that battalion would include a Combat Logistics Company. Stationing remains undetermined. This opportunity matters because the Army National Guard is planning additional Tactical Combat Force infantry battalions in coming force structure cycles, and Illinois intends to compete aggressively for missions that preserve readiness, warfighting capability, and opportunities for our Soldiers.

Illinois also competed for a Maneuver Enhancement Brigade Support Battalion. If awarded, that formation would consist of 276 spaces and include a Headquarters and Headquarters Company, a Distribution Company, and a Maintenance Company. Its mission would be to provide sustainment support to the brigade and subordinate units by delivering supplies, services, and maintenance needed to preserve freedom of maneuver and operational effectiveness. As current planning indicates, the Illinois Army National Guard competes well and is postured to receive this force structure upon announcement. Stationing has not yet been determined.

These are substantial changes. They affect proud units, longstanding missions, and people who have invested years of service in building those organizations. That is especially true when change touches historic formations such as the 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment. The history, sacrifice, and identity tied to these units matter deeply, and we will honor that legacy with the respect it deserves.

At the same time, we must be candid: these changes are necessary.

The Department of War is aligning the force against current and future threats. That means investing in organizations better suited for contested, fast-moving environments where formations must sense farther, move faster, sustain themselves more effectively, and operate with greater precision across the information and electromagnetic domains. In that context, modernization is not optional. It is essential to ensuring that Illinois remains a combat-ready, relevant, and trusted part of the total force.

As we move through this transition, one principle will guide us above all others: we will take care of our people while accomplishing the mission.

That means we will do everything in our power to ensure every Soldier, Airman, and civilian employee affected by these changes has a place in the new force structure. We know these transitions create uncertainty about assignments, military occupational specialties, retraining, promotion opportunities, commuting distances, family stability, and long-term career paths. Those concerns are real, and they deserve direct, honest leadership.

Our commitment is to manage this transition deliberately and responsibly. We will work across the organization to identify reassignment opportunities, retraining options, and pathways into emerging formations and modernized missions. We will preserve talent wherever possible. We will communicate early and often. And we will ensure leaders at every echelon remain engaged with the people most affected by these decisions.

For some, this transition will mean joining new organizations built for the future fight. For others, it will mean moving from a legacy formation into a mission set that better matches where the Army and Air Force are headed. In every case, our goal is the same: retain our people, respect their service, and position them to continue contributing to the Illinois National Guard mission.

Illinois has always answered the call, whether overseas, at home, or in support of our communities. We have met hard missions before, and we will meet this one the same way: together, professionally, and with our people at the center of the effort.

Thank you for your service, your resilience, and your continued commitment to this organization. I remain confident in our force, proud of what we represent, and committed to leading this transition in a way that strengthens both our readiness and our people.

Always Ready, Always There.

Major General Rodney Boyd
The Adjutant General of Illinois
Commander, Illinois National Guard

Hicks Appointed as United States Property and Fiscal Officer for Illinois

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, has announced the appointment of Col. Jeffrey P. Hicks as the United States Property and Fiscal Officer (USPFO) for Illinois.

Col. Hicks replaced Col. Brian Creech, who retired at the end of September after a 40-year distinguished career.

"Colonel Creech has served the Illinois National Guard and the nation with unwavering dedication and financial stewardship. His leadership as the USPFO has been instrumental to our success, and we wish him a long and happy retirement," said Maj. Gen. Boyd. "We are thrilled to welcome Colonel Hicks into this new role. His extensive experience in logistics and financial management within the Illinois National Guard, most recently as the Deputy USPFO, makes him the ideal leader to continue our tradition of excellence and accountability. I have the utmost confidence in his ability to lead this critical office."

Reflecting on his tenure, Creech expressed gratitude for the opportunity to serve. "Serving as the United States Property and Fiscal Officer for Illinois has been the honor of my career," said Creech. "I am incredibly proud of the work our team has accomplished to ensure the readiness of the Illinois National Guard. I know the office is in highly capable hands with Colonel Hicks, and I look forward to seeing its continued success."

Throughout his career, Creech demonstrated a strong commitment to service both stateside and overseas. He deployed to Iraq with the 232nd Corps Support Battalion from January 2004 to January 2005, serving as the intelligence and operations officer. Additionally,



Col. Jeffrey P. Hicks has been selected as the United States Property and Fiscal Officer (USPFO) for Illinois.



Col. Brian Creech, the United States Property and Fiscal Officer for Illinois, retired at the end of September after a distinguished 40-year military career.

his extensive operational experience includes participating in multinational exercises such as Eager Lion in Jordan and Anaconda 18 in Poland.

Hicks expressed his readiness to assume the new responsibilities. "I am deeply honored by the trust placed in me to serve as the next USPFO for Illinois," said Hicks. "Colonel Creech has set a high standard of excellence during his tenure, and I am committed to building upon that foundation to provide optimal stewardship of our federal resources and steadfast support for our service members."

Hicks, a native of Springfield, Illinois, has more than 23 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant from the Officer Candidate School in 2006. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions with increasing responsibility, including a deployment to Iraq from 2004 to 2006 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and a deployment to Afghanistan in 2010 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Prior to this appointment, Hicks served as the Deputy USPFO, where he was responsible for assisting in the management of all federal resources for the Illinois National Guard. He had served as the USPFO Financial Manager and Supply and Services Division Chief before his selection as Deputy USPFO.

As the USPFO, Hicks will work directly for the Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau,Army Gen. Thomas M. Carden Jr. In this capacity, Hicks is responsible for receiving, accounting for, and safeguarding all federal funds and property provided to the Illinois National Guard. Operating in this vital role, he ensures federal resources are properly managed and allocated to maintain the readiness of the state's National Guard units for both state and federal missions.

Illinois' Jason Benhart Recognized as One of Top Inspector General Civilians

Jason M. Benhart, a civilian employee with the Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters Office of the Inspector General, placed third in the U.S. Army 2026 Inspector General of the Year Competition in the civilian category, and is the top civilian Inspector General in the Army National Guard.

In recognition of this exceptional achievement, Lt. Gen. Gregory J. Brady, The Inspector General of the Army, awarded Benhart. the Civilian Service Achievement Medal

Benhart represented the Illinois National Guard in the nation's capital in May, competing against other top Inspector General professionals from across the Army. He has more than 20 years of experience as an Inspector General, and also served in the military for 31 years, retiring as a master sergeant.

"It was an honor to be recognized among a group of talented professionals in the Inspector General Corps," Benhart said. "The event put me in communication with some of the top talent in the IG enterprise and was a great opportunity to meet some of my colleagues from across the force. The competition was tough but gave me the chance to test my skills against the top Inspectors General in the Army."

Illinois Army National Guard leaders praised Benhart's selection and his commitment to the organization.

"The Inspector General's Office plays a vital role as the 'eyes and ears' of the Commander" and having an employee of Mr. Benhart's caliber in that office helps us improve the health of the Illinois National Guard and increase our readiness and efficiency," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard. "I'm proud to have him as part of our team."

"We are extremely proud of him, though not surprised as he is a pillar of excellence and consistently delivers stellar performance across the IG Team," said Col. Jermon Tillman, the Inspector General for the Illinois National Guard.

Benhart, who was named an outstanding Department of War employee in 2025, holds several specialized certifications. He is qualified as an Air Force Inspector General, and as a Joint Inspector General.



Jason M. Benhart, a civilian employee with the Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters Office of the Inspector General, placed third in the U.S. Army 2026 Inspector General of the Year Competition in the civilian category, and is the top civilian Inspector General in the Army National Guard.

Additionally, he is an emergency medical technician (EMT) and volunteer firefighter and has earned a bachelor's degree in recreation and park administration from Illinois State University.

The Department of the Army competition recognizes civilian employees who best exemplify the Army profession and contribute to the Inspector General enterprise. Nominees are evaluated on five key characteristics: trust, military expertise, honorable service, esprit de corps and stewardship. During the May competition at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, competitors were tested on core Inspector General functions, including assistance, investigations, inspections, and teaching and training.

Gov. Pritzker Signs Legislation Strengthening Support for Illinois Service Members and Veterans

New laws bolster Illinois National Guard recruitment, protections for students after academic military leave, access to breakthrough mental health therapies for veterans

Governor JB Pritzker signed three bills into law that will fortify recruitment to the Illinois National Guard with newly incentivized peer-to-peer referral practices, as well as connect our state's veterans to continued education pathways and life-saving breakthrough therapies for suicide prevention, July 15.

"Every service member makes a sacrifice when they take time away from their loved ones, career, or education to answer the call to defend our nation," said Governor JB Pritzker. "This legislation ensures our Illinois veterans can return to the lives they put on pause with the support and resources they need to thrive. The State of Illinois is working to build a strong, capable, prepared National Guard, both by introducing new recruitment pathways and creating programs that assist service members long after their service is complete."

"Our service members have answered the call to serve our country, and Illinois is committed to serving them in return," said Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton. "These new laws strengthen support for military families by expanding educational opportunities, increasing access to innovative mental health care, and investing in the future of the Illinois National Guard. It's one more way we're honoring their service with meaningful action."

These bills include:

- **SB 3737:** Requires universities to promptly readmit students following academic military leave, effective Jan. 1, 2027 (Sen. Porfirio/Rep. Stuart)
- **SB 3818:** Incentivizes Illinois National Guard recruitment with peer-to-peer referrals, effective Jan. 1, 2027 (Sen. Porfirio/Rep. Swanson)
- **SB 3926:** Moves the Breakthrough Therapies for Veteran Suicide Prevention Program Advisory Council under the Department of Public Health, effective Jan. 1, 2027 (Sen. Porfirio/Rep. Hirschauer)

Helping Veterans Return to the Classroom After Academic Military Leave

National Guard and U.S. Reserve service members are often called into active duty without advance notice, forcing students to face academic penalties, tuition loss, and other barriers to completing their degrees.

SB 3737, the Service Member Education Rights Veneration Act, is modeled after the federal SERVE Act and creates a more direct pathway for students to complete their studies after military service interruption. The law requires universities to grant veterans prompt readmission, so long as the student follows the proper reporting process and their leave is no longer than five years.

"Supporting our veterans and service members is about more than recognizing them for their sacrifice and honor; it's about creating good policy that provides support and relief where they need it most," said Senator Mike Porfirio (D-Lyons Township). "Whether it's leading cutting-edge innovations to treat veterans suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or making it easier for military students to return to classes after being deployed, Illinois is on the forefront of policy that will empower our service members throughout their lives."

Building a Robust and Prepared Illinois National Guard

SB 3818 bolsters recruitment to the Illinois National Guard with new grants incentivizing peer-to-peer referrals through the establishment of the Joint Enlistment Enhancement Program (JEEP) under the Illinois Department of Military Affairs. This program leverages the indispensable knowledge of current Illinois National Guard members to facilitate the enlistment of new soldiers and airmen and provides financial compensation for successful referrals.

Neighboring and peer states have reported increased recruitment through similar programs. Aligning with these measures will allow Illinois to maintain a strong and capable National Guard, prepared to effectively respond to state domestic emergencies and contribute to our nation's defense.

"The JEEP program authorizes the Department of Military Affairs to make grants for the purpose of incentivizing recruitment into the Illinois National Guard and would increase recruitment through peer-to-peer referrals," said Representative Dan Swanson (R-Alpha). "This will make it possible for more Illinoisans to have opportunities to access all the training and job skills that National Guard membership can provide."

"Members of our military, whether serving in unnecessary foreign wars or right here at home in

the National Guard, deserve to pursue an education when they return from service," said Katie Stuart (D-Edwardsville). "The SERVE Act ensures that students' higher education enrollment and student standing are preserved, allowing military members and veterans to return to their education and develop a career beyond their invaluable service to our state and our country."

"Our nation celebrated its 250th birthday on July 4. In those 250 years, the Illinois National Guard has responded to every major conflict our nation has faced and every major domestic emergency the State of Illinois has faced," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois, Commander of the Illinois National Guard, and Director of the Illinois Department of Military Affairs. "We need to recruit and retain dedicated men and women to accomplish both our state and federal missions. The Joint Enlistment Enhancement Program will help us in this endeavor, and it will put us in a better position to meet whatever challenges we might face in the next 250 years and beyond."

Supporting Access to Breakthrough Therapies for Veterans' Mental Health

The Breakthrough Therapies for Veteran Suicide Prevention Program Advisory Council was created to advise the State on the health care infrastructure needed to provide veterans with access to preliminary clinical drug trials that might offer significant mental health benefits. These therapies include MDMA and pharmaceutical-grade psilocybin, which are used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, treatment-resistant depression, and anxiety – conditions many veterans struggle with after service and combat.

SB 3926 amends the Department of Healthcare and Family Services Law and the Department of Public Health Act, moving the Council under the purview of the Illinois Department of Public Health, which is better equipped to oversee and support this specific program.

"Veterans are at a 58 percent higher risk of dying by suicide, and as advocates for veterans, we witness the challenges each day," said Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director Terry Prince. "SB 3926 exemplifies the state's commitment to implementing every strategy available to ensure Illinois veterans receive the resources, therapies, and support they need to avoid a crisis and prevent suicide."

"Our veterans fought for America's future. We owe them access to the future of medicine," said State Rep. Maura Hirschauer (D-West Chicago). "Senate Bill 3926 strengthens the expertise needed to responsibly advance FDA Breakthrough Therapies that can bring new hope to veterans facing the invisible wounds of service."

Governor Pritzker believes that the State is responsible for supporting our service members and veterans with the same level of commitment they have shown defending and serving Illinois. Today's legislation is an important step in connecting service men and women to teams they can rely on while protecting our state and nation, as well as continued education and crucial mental health treatments after their service ends.



Staff members from U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth's office met with Illinois National Guard leaders at Camp Lincoln Aug. 19. During the visit, the group was briefed on two military construction projects for the Illinois Army National Guard, an update on the Illinois Air National Guard's priorities for the three Wings, and an update on the State Partnerships with Poland and Portugal.



From left, Sgt. Summer Flores, Spc. Melissa Gomez, Spc. Joel Ocon, and Spc. Simon Rupniewski assisted a man involved in a serious motorcycle accident Aug. 10 when the Illinois Army National Guard's North Riverside-based 708th Medical Company (Ground Ambulance) was training as part of Northern Strike on Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in Michigan. (Courtesy photo.)

Team of Illinois Army National Guard Medics Respond to Real-Life Emergency During Northern Strike Exercise in Michigan

Four Illinois Army National Guard medics showed what it means to be 'Always Ready, Always There' by assisting an injured motorcyclist while on annual training, Aug. 10, while supporting the Northern Strike exercise on Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in Michigan.

"It was clear that they knew what they were doing," said Sgt. Matt Swope of the Crawford County (Mich.) Sheriff's Office, one of the first responders who responded to the scene. "By the time the paramedics arrived and took over, the Soldiers had stabilized the motorcyclist."

Illinois Army National Guard Sgt. Summer Flores of the North Riverside (Ill.)-based 708th Medical Company (Ground Ambulance) said she and her three medics - Spc. Joel Ocon, Spc. Melissa Gomez, and Spc. Simon Rupniewski – were just returning from a training mission on Camp Grayling at about 1:15 p.m. when they came upon a "big chunk of metal on the highway."

Sgt. Swope said the elderly man was driving a three-wheeled trike on U.S. 72 westbound near Lake Margrethe when one of the rear wheels gave way throwing the man from the motorcycle. He said the medics and a civilian doctor just happened to be driving by and immediately started to assist the unconscious man in the critical minutes before first responders could arrive on the scene.

Sgt. Flores said she and her Soldiers, working as a team with the doctor, secured the unconscious man on spine board, applied a pelvic binder, treated a head laceration, and helped paramedics get him unto a stretcher when they arrived.

The man is now alive and conscious, Sgt. Swope said. "Those Soldiers were a great help," he said. He added that traffic had to be re-routed along U.S. 72 for three to four hours because of the accident.

"I am so proud of our Soldiers," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard. "They received the proper training and they exercised that training to the point that it became second nature to them. When this real-life emergency happened, they were confident enough to go do their job."

U.S. and Malaysian Soldiers conduct joint walking blood bank training

Story and photos by
Sgt. Nicholas Bushey
204th Public Affairs Detachment

During Exercise Keris Strike 26, Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 709th Medical Company Support Area led a walking blood bank training event near Kota Belud in Sabah, Malaysia, on July 17.

The session shared critical medical knowledge with Malaysian Army Soldiers from Company B, 1st Medical Battalion, and U.S. Army Soldiers from the Guam Army National Guard. This bilateral training builds stronger interoperability between U.S. and Malaysian forces, ultimately reinforcing peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Designed for austere environments where stored blood products are unavailable, a walking blood bank utilizes a roster of pre-screened personnel ready to donate fresh whole blood on-demand during emergency field operations.

"The walking blood bank is new to the National Guard and the Army itself," said U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Anita Neuhaus of the 709th Medical Company Support Area. "This was our opportunity to show lessons learned."

These events also give U.S. Soldiers and Malaysian forces an opportunity to work with equipment and materiel they might not regularly access outside of a realistic training environment.

"We have the walking blood bank in our doctrine, but we don't have that in a real setting," said Malaysian Army Maj. Alfam, a doctor with Bravo Company, 1st Medical Battalion. "... after the exercise we can propose to our higher-ups what we should improve in our setting."

Keris Strike 26 offers U.S. Army and Malaysian Soldiers the opportunity to reinforce their tactical skills and support readiness, and ultimately show the U.S. Army's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Anita Neuhas with the 709th Medical Company Area Support, Illinois National Guard, shows how to prevent blood from clotting during blood transfusions to Malaysian Army soldiers from Bravo Company, 1st Medical Battalion and Soldiers from the Guam National Guard during Exercise Keris Strike 26 near Kota Belud, Malaysia, July 17. The training provided U.S. and partner forces hands-on experience with mobile blood field-deployable systems used to store and transport blood products to deliver lifesaving care in austere combat environments.



Soldiers from 709th Medical Company Area Support, Illinois National Guard run a practice blood draw during a demonstration of a simulated blood infusion as part of Exercise Keris Strike 26 near Kota Belud, Malaysia, July 17. Keris Strike builds readiness and interoperability among Malaysian, Australian and American forces through realistic training that showcases the U.S. Army's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.



U.S. Army Spc. Xavier Steward, Illinois National Guard 176th Cyber Protection Team, and Portuguese Armed Forces 1st Sgt. Samuel Patricio collaborate on real-world cyber scenario training during the annual Cyber Shield training event held at the Professional Education Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, July 21. Cyber Shield 2026 is the largest annual Department of War cyber training event, bringing together over 1,000 participants from 44 states and territories and 23 countries to collaborate and strengthen cyber capabilities on a global scale.

ILNG Collaborates with New State Partners during Cyber Shield 2026

Story and Photos by
Staff Sgt. Alexandria King
183rd Wing Public Affairs

After becoming Illinois' newest state partner on Jan. 12, Portugal dove into Cyber Shield 2026 and collaborated alongside Illinois military guardsmen to support cyber defense capabilities at the Professional Education Center (PEC).

The State Partnership Program, led by the National Guard, aims to enhance and reinforce the security cooperation objectives of the U.S. combatant commands. These relationships between U.S. states and countries strengthen military capabilities through exchanges of knowledge, opportunities, and security.

"This partnership, it's very good for us," said Capt. Gonçalo Atanásio, Portuguese Armed Forces, Cyber Command. "We are liking this exercise very much. We are learning a lot…It's important for us because, if we go into a state of emergency, like COVID for example, [we] need to take care of critical infrastructure. So, this is a big improvement for us, and we are very happy to be here."

Cyber Shield is the Department of Defense's largest annual unclassified cyber exercise.

This year's event, Cyber Shield 2026, hosted more than 1,000

participants from across the globe and embodies a key priority of the U.S. military: teamwork and partnership.

"Immediately, [Portugal was] interested in coming here to support us in our Cyber Shield exercise," said Capt. Aliaksei Makarau, cyber warfare officer, 176th Cyber Protection Team, Illinois Army National Guard.

Working side by side to strengthen cyber defense strategies, the Portuguese Armed Forces, Illinois Army National Guard, and Illinois Air National Guard have demonstrated the significance of state partnerships.

"Each participant has been very helpful, adjusting and learning, to make sure that we succeed in this exercise, learn something useful, learn how to be efficient and effective, and take something back with us to share with our counterparts," Makarau said.

For many members, working with different countries during Cyber Shield offers a new, unique perspective on cyber operations and develops new skills within the field.

"[Cyber Shield has] shown me what cyber is about," said Staff Sgt. Piotr Iwaszek, radio frequencies operator, 18rdr Communications Squadron, ILNG.

Iwaszek further explains that he has continued to grow by learning new skills from our state partners. Specifically, he has acquired new techniques for reinforcing network systems and mitigating cyber vulnerabilities.

"I think what I would bring back to my country is how you structure yourselves team-wise," Atanásio said. "We have never participated in any cyber exercise with this dimension outside of the NATO context, so it's a different approach. We are learning with Captain Makarau about how he would structure the team to make this work and how to be successful in a cyber response incident."

The success of Cyber Shield 2026 is measured not only by the technical capabilities demonstrated, but also by the collaboration among different teams and countries throughout the exercise. As cyber threats continue to evolve, the teamwork between military personnel, state partners, and allied nations remains critical to mission success.

By training together at Cyber Shield 2026, participants emphasize the unified commitment to readiness, resilience, and security.



Portuguese Armed Forces 1st Sgt. Samuel Patricio conducts real-world cyber scenario training during the annual Cyber Shield training event held at the Professional Education Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, July 21.



Anna Corbett, a test engineer with the National Center for Reliable Electric Power Transmission, demonstrates a cybersecurity visualization model to Col. Jason Carter and Command Sgt. Maj. LaCarl Baker, 65th Troop Command Brigade during Cyber Shield 2026 at the Professional Education Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, July 18. Corbett designed and built the interactive model to demonstrate how cybersecurity protects critical infrastructure by translating cyber concepts into a visual learning experience for participants.

Illinois Air National Guard welcomes first Air Force warrant officer since rank reinstatement

Story by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer
182nd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

A member of the Illinois Air National Guard has graduated as the state's first Air Force warrant officer since the branch reintroduced the rank structure.

Warrant Officer Erik Khamphouy, a network operations specialist assigned to the 264th Combat Communications Squadron, graduated from the Warrant Officer Training School at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, on May 28.

The graduation marks a significant milestone for Khamphouy, his squadron, the 182nd Airlift Wing, and the historical legacy of the Illinois National Guard, according to Maj. Eric A. Karas, commander of the 264th Combat Communications Squadron. Karas, who attended the ceremony, noted that the achievement represents the beginning of a new chapter for the organization as the Air Force continues to expand its warrant officer corps.

"This isn't simply an accession of one exceptional Airman. It's the beginning of a new era of technical leadership in the 264th Combat Communications Squadron," said Karas. "Warrant Officer Khamphouy will help define what this rank means in the Illinois Air National Guard, by merging unmatched technical mastery with operational insight to strengthen our unit and deliver decisive capability to the joint warfighter. The standard he sets today will influence generations of warrant officers who follow."

In the military structure, warrant officers function as single-specialty technical subject matter experts.

Capt. Andrew W. Uhe, an expeditionary communications officer with the 264th Combat Communications Squadron, said this dedicated focus makes the rank a significant asset to modern military operations. The communications community is rapidly evolving, and Uhe noted that having a holistic technical subject matter expert focus their bandwidth on equipment — without the additional concerns carried by senior noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers — serves as a unit force multiplier.

Before his selection, Khamphouy served as a staff sergeant in network operations, holding the Air Force Specialty Code 1D751A. He secured his position after applying alongside a highly competitive pool of candidates from across the country.

Khamphouy will serve as a drill status guardsman, maintaining his role in the newly established warrant



Maj. Eric A. Karas, left, Commander, 264th Combat Communications Squadron, attended the graduation ceremony for Warrant Officer Erik Khamphouy, a network operations specialist assigned to the 264th Combat Communications Squadron.

officer position while continuing his civilian career.

In his new assignment, Khamphouy will report directly to the commander and provide technical consultation across the organizational chart. He will attend leadership meetings and any sessions requiring planning for technical support.

"It is an honor to be appointed as the state's first warrant officer after the rank's reintroduction. couldn't have done it without great leaders and mentors, both militarily and technically," Khamphouy said. "Now, I have a chance to give back to the unit and wing by focusing on taking the technical skills I have learned through the years and pairing them with this new role. I look forward to integrating with the new Air Force warrant officer corps and bringing the 'Peoria way' to the Air Force's combat communications challenges."

To maximize his impact, Khamphouy will undergo a comprehensive onboarding process designed to expand his technical base. Uhe outlined a plan where Khamphouy will shadow senior noncommissioned officers from different shops, including radio, client systems, surety, and power production. He will also attend Formal Training Unit courses to build a knowledge base that is both deep and wide.

This high-level technical perspective will allow Khamphouy to aid in training and the documentation of unit processes, specifically focusing on how individual shops interface with one another and with customers.

Khamphouy will also network with other warrant officers from the combat communications community. Unit leaders expect this collaboration to serve as a source of relevant and timely information sharing that addresses the entire mission, rather than keeping functions stove-piped to specific areas.



U.S. Air Force Warrant Officer Erik Khamphouy, center-left, a network operations specialist with the 264th Combat Communications Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, receives his graduation certificate during the Warrant Officer Training School graduation ceremony at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, May 28. The graduation marks Khamphouy's appointment as the first Air Force warrant officer in the Illinois Air National Guard following the service branch's reinstatement of the warrant officer corps. (U.S. Air National Guard courtesy photo)

The path to his appointment began on March 30, when Khamphouy arrived at Maxwell Air Force Base to begin classes at the Warrant Officer Training School, a unit operating under the Jeanne M. Holm Center for Officer Accessions and Citizen Development. The curriculum concluded with an open house and an official oath ceremony on May 27, followed by the formal auditorium graduation on May 28.

As Khamphouy returns to Springfield to begin his drill status duties, his immediate focus shifts to the squadron's equipment and cross-shop integration. For the 264th Combat Communications Squadron, his tenure offers a real-time application of the Air Force's reinstated warrant officer structure.

Rather than balancing technical oversight with the personnel management expected of traditional senior enlisted leaders, Khamphouy will advise command directly on network capabilities. His integration into the 182nd Airlift Wing will establish the practical baseline for the Illinois Air National Guard, demonstrating exactly how this restored rank functions within modern military operations.

Editor's note: This information includes elements of AI-generated content, which were reviewed and edited by relevant DoD personnel to verify appropriateness and compliance with DoD policies and guidance.

‘Discipline, Sacrifice, Teamwork’
126th ARW Earns Metcalf Trophy

Story by
Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison
126th Air Refueling Wing Public Affairs



U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Randal Efferson, right, U.S. Air National Guard, acting director, and retired Maj. Gen. Ondra Berry, with Col. Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing, commander, after winning the The Curtis N. “Rusty” Metcalf trophy at Indianapolis, Indiana, Aug. 31, 2026. It was presented to the 126th Air Refueling Wing for being the best Air Refueling Wing in the Air National Guard. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Mike O’Koniewski)

The 126th Air Refueling Wing has been recognized as the best Air Refueling Wing for 2025 by the National Guard Association of the United States at a ceremony in Indianapolis, Indiana, during the NGAUS Conference and Exhibition, Aug. 31.

The wing commander, Col. Nick Henschel, received the Rusty Metcalf trophy on behalf of the Illinois Air National Guard wing, stationed at Scott Air Force Base.

“I’m honored to accept this award on behalf of the 900 men and women from the 126 ARW,” said Henschel. “I’m incredibly proud of our Airmen for all their amazing accomplishments over the last year and very happy that the Air National Guard recognized their outstanding performance.”

The Curtis N. “Rusty” Metcalf trophy is named for the former National Guard Bureau Deputy Chief, Plans and Operations Division. It is presented to the best Airlift or Air Refueling Wing in the Air National Guard.

Throughout 2025, the wing supported six combatant commands. Including Operation Midnight Hammer, it played a pivotal part in the air bridge that culminated in the largest B-2 strike in history.

During Operation Rough Rider, its crews flew 16 combat sorties, offloading more than 143 thousand pounds of fuel to fighter jets, supporting operations to protect freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.

“This award demonstrates high standards in mission accomplishment, but it also represents a culture of excellence,” said Henschel. “The 126 ARW has a long history of operational success and that trend continues today. We like to say that the best predictor of future success is past success, so the future is very bright for the 126 ARW.”

The Maintenance Group won the ANG Maintenance Effectiveness Award by leading the entire KC-135 enterprise with an 83.7% Mission Capable Rate and 73.5% Aircraft Availability Rate, marking the 10th consecutive year the group has led in those categories.

“Earning the Metcalf Trophy is a testament to the unwavering commitment this wing brings to the mission every single day,” said Staff Sgt. Andrew Carroll, 126th Maintenance Squadron, aircraft structural maintenance. “It is a representation of the discipline, sacrifice, and teamwork of every member who strives to achieve excellence in all we do.”

The wing executed the first-ever alternate location nuclear Combat Readiness Exercise, which directly supported the Air Force Chief of Staff’s #1 priority.

“After doing all the training and all the exercises, one of the things

that stood out was the alternate duty location, where it was the first time ever for the nuclear exercise," Carroll said. "After all that hard work and training we put in, and then seeing that come to fruition this year, it made me feel proud to be a part of the wing."

The wing's Mobile Support Team worked with the Army Reserve during the Quartermaster Liquid Logistics Exercise, executing a Strategic Command-directed bladder fuel transfer to 9 aircraft.

During an Innovative Readiness Training in Puerto Rico, the Medical Group, working alongside other U.S. military servicemembers, provided 9,900 no-cost medical procedures to 1,900 patients.

"The feeling is honestly wonderful because knowing that the work I put in directly contributed to the wing winning the Metcalf Trophy is something I'm genuinely proud of," said Senior Airman Daehly Day, 126th Comptroller Flight, financial management.

Day was part of a CPTF office that processed more than 1,500 travel vouchers, executing $5.8M in travel funds, and securing a $44,000 government travel card rebate that was reinvested into unfunded mission requirements,



Members from the 126th Air Refueling Wing spread out a 50,000-gallon fuel bladder at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, June 3, 2025. The 126th ARW led a Quartermaster Liquid Logistics Exercise, which is part of a larger U.S. Strategic Command-directed series of events designed to validate emerging and innovate tactics, techniques and procedures (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)

including a new alert facility kitchen.

"But what means the most to me is being part of a team and a community that truly uplifts each other. Everyone pushes hard, not for themselves or because they have to, but because we want to see the wing succeed," said Day.

The wing lived up to the term "Citizen Airmen," with members volunteering their time in the community. Members from the 126th Maintenance Squadron spent two days, 16 hours, at a local Veterans of Foreign Wars post repainting an AH-1 Cobra helicopter and a cannon.

The wing's official vision: "Be the best Tanker wing in the Air National Guard."

Henschel sees the Metcalf Trophy as a step toward that vision becoming reality.

"Our number one goal is to lead and take care of our Airmen, so that remains a priority for us, especially during this latest deployment cycle. One of the specific ways we take care of our Airmen is to recognize them for outstanding performance, so our next objective is to win the Air Mobility Command — Maj. Gen. Stanley Newman award for Outstanding ANG unit. Based on our outstanding Airmen and all of their incredible accomplishments, I'm confident that we will compete very well for this next award!"



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Keith Eddy, 906th Air Refueling Squadron, petroleum oils and lubricants, inspects fuel coming out of a tanker truck before hooking up a hose to fill up a fuel bladder at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, June 4, 2025. The 126th Air Refueling Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, led a Quartermaster Liquid Logistics Exercise, it is part of a larger U.S. Strategic Command-directed series of events designed to validate emerging and innovate tactics, techniques and procedures (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)



Capt. Jonathan Mercado, right, Commander, Detachment 2, Company G, 1-111th General Aviation Support Battalion, and Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Panatera, acting first sergeant, case the unit's guidon during a ceremony July 12 at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee.

Illinois Army Aviation MEDEVAC Writes Final Chapter of Unit's History with Casing of Colors

Story and photos by
Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

On Oct. 1, 2012 then-Detachment 2, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 135th General Support Aviation Battalion (GSAB), more commonly known as "DUSTOFF" started writing its own history chapter as part of the Illinois Army National Guard.

The final chapter for Detachment 2, Company G, Detachment 7, Company D, and Detachment 8, Company E, 1-111th GSAB was written July 12, as the unit cased its guidon at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee, ending a storied chapter in aviation medical evacuation in the Illinois Army National Guard.

"Today, we close an important chapter in Illinois Army Aviation as we deactivate these detachments and case their guidon," said Lt. Col. Zachary De Groot, Commander, 1-106th Assault Helicopter Battalion (AHB). "Although this ceremony marks the end of the unit's current organizational structure, it does not mark the end of its legacy, its Soldiers, or its contribution to the readiness of Illinois Army Aviation."

In November 2012, 1-106th AHB sent out

a statewide announcement to begin manning Detachment 2, Company C, 2-135th GSAB specifically focused on the unique skill set required of a flight paramedic.

"There is a profound philosophy embedded in the very DNA of the MEDEVAC culture," said Capt. Jonathan Mercado, the MEDEVAC Commander. "The acronym DUSTOFF – Dedicated Unhesitating Service To Our Fighting Force is not only a callsign, but a promise that when the world is at its worst, the best is on their way."

In 2015, 21 Soldiers from Detachment 2, Company C, and two Soldiers from Detachment 8, Company D, 2-135th GSAB mobilized to Kuwait in support of Operation Enduring Freedom-Spartan Shield. Along with members of Company C, 171st GSAB from New Mexico and Medevac detachments from Nebraska and Wisconsin, Company C, 2-135th GSAB provided aeromedical evacuation and aeromedical evacuation support from July-December 2015.

During the Detachment's 2015 deployment, they performed 14 medical evacuation missions under day and night vision conditions, executed more than 1, 200 flight hours, and performed numerous training missions with Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines throughout the Kuwait area of responsibility.

> **"Although this ceremony marks the end of the unit's organizational structure, it does not mark the end of its legacy."**
>
> ***Lt. Col. Zachary DeGroot***
> *Commander*
> *1-106th Assault Helicopter Battalion*

Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Panatera, the detachment's noncommissioned officer in charge and senior enlisted leader said the purpose of a medical evacuation or MEDEVAC is simple.

"MEDEVAC's purpose is to provide rapid transport and enroute medical care for ill or injured patients," he said. "While the concept is simple, accomplishing this goal has many challenges. It takes every Soldier of that DUSTOFF unit to ensure those patients are afforded the absolute best level of care. Our Soldiers have proven themselves time and time again. From deployment missions, training exercises, and advanced training courses, our focus never wavered."

On Sept. 21, 2016, upon return from deployment, the unit was reflagged as Detachment 2, Company G, Detachment 7, Company D, and Detachment 8, Company E, 1-111th GSAB.

De Groot said the unit's commitment was demonstrated during the unit's 2015 deployment to Kuwait but didn't stop there.



Lt. Col. Zachary De Groot, Commander, 1-106th Assault Helicopter Battalion, delivers remarks during a ceremony July 12 marking the casing of the guidon for Detachment 2, Company G, 1-111th General Aviation Support Battalion at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee.

"It continued through thousands of flight and maintenance hours, international engagements with our partners in Poland, personnel recovery training at Nellis Air Force Base, support to Special Operations training at Fort Bliss, and numerous joint missions," said De Groot. "Most recently the unit's 2025 annual training at Camp Ripley demonstrated the professionalism and readiness of this formation. For the first time in more than two years, the detachment conducted critical MEDEVAC training missions that exercised the full organization – from tactical operations center functions and mission coordination to patient treatment and movement from the point of injury to a medical treatment facility."

De Groot said the unit's training missions did more than validate aircrews.

"They required leaders, maintainers, flight medics, operations Soldiers, and sustainment Soldiers to work as one team," he said. "Captain Mercado played a central role in that effort. He helped ensure the detachment maintained readiness level one crews who were available and ready for MEDEVAC missions. He led his formation to be the fiscal year 2026 runner up in the Army National Guard's Modified Tables of Organization and Equipment small category of the Army Award for Maintenance Excellence."

The award recognizes units with outstanding maintenance operations and readiness. It honors those units whose maintenance practices set the benchmark for the Army. De Groot said the honor would not have been possible without the leadership and hard work of the organization.

De Groot also recognized Panatera.

"Together Captain Mercado and Sergeant First Class Panatera approached the deactivation with



Capt. Jonathan Mercado, commander, Detachment 2, Company G, 1-111th General Support Aviation Battalion, thanks the Soldiers for their commitment to the medical evacuation mission during the casing of the unit's guidon July 12 at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee.



Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Panatera, acting first sergeant of the Illinois Army National Guard's Detachment 2, Company G, 1-111th General Aviation Support Battalion, delivers remarks during the ceremony.

discipline, accountability, and genuine concern for their Soldiers," De Groot said. "Their professionalism ensured the unit completed its responsibilities with dignity and honor."

De Groot emphasized the training at Camp Ripley will not be lost.

"Readiness does not reside only in an organization's name or in the guidon we case today," he said. "It resides in trained Soldiers, experienced leaders, proficient crews, disciplined maintainers, and cohesive teams. Those Soldiers will carry their knowledge, standards, and experience into their next formations where they will continue supporting the Illinois Army National Guard and the mission of the U.S. Army."

Mercado said the July 12 ceremony honored how the history of the MEDEVAC detachment lived up to that promise.

"I've had the unique privilege of serving as the commander during this final chapter of our timeline. But the strength of this unit was not built overnight. We follow a long line of great commanders, warrant officers, and noncommissioned officers who came before us, paving the way and setting the standard for what this organization became," he said. "What truly makes an organization great isn't the aircraft or the equipment. It's the Soldiers. Our most valuable asset – the ones who routinely step away from their civilian lives, from friends and family, dedicating time and energy to the collective effort of building on the foundation of this unit."

Mercado said each Soldier who served in the detachment should be proud of their role in the unit's history.

"You drove this mission and made it happen," he said. "Your dedication and service to the MEDEVAC mission more than just the Soldier who relies on our support on their worst day."

He said the Soldiers will carry that legacy forward.

"While we spend today casing our colors, the true legacy of this organization is not rolled up in a piece of fabric," he said. "It lives on in the way we carry ourselves, the standards we keep, and the professionals we will continue to be in our next duty assignments."

Panatera said from the beginning of the unit's formation in 2012 to today, every Soldier, regardless of military occupational specialty, exceeded the standard. But each Soldier's support system also played a role in the unit's success.

"We also thank our families for their continued understanding and support," he said. "It has been an absolute honor to watch this unit evolve throughout the years. For myself, I have grown as a Soldier, instructor, leader and most proudly a senior aviator."

De Groot summed up everyone's sentiment during the ceremony.

"Today, we case the guidon, but the spirit of DUSTOFF and Company G, 1-111th continues," he said.

The approximately 30 Soldiers serving in the detachment have transferred to other Illinois Army National Guard units.



Illinois National Guard Conducts Helocast Operations at Fort McCoy







Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard participated in helocast operations at Big Sandy Lake at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin in June. Soldiers practiced entry into the lake from both a Blackhawk and a Chinook. Soldiers then swam to shore or were carried ashore aboard a Zodiac boat. (U.S. Army photos by Greg Mason, Fort McCoy Multimedia Visual Information)

Retired Chief Master Sergeant Wants to Help Veterans Heal Through Social Work

Story by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs



Chief Master Sgt. (ret.) Rebecca Velazquez poses with her husband, Chief Master Sgt. Bryan Velazquez, during an event. After serving 27 years in the Illinois Air National Guard and retiring as the 183rd Wing Command Chief, Velazquez is pursuing a career in mental health social work with a focus on supporting veterans and underserved communities.

After 27 years in uniform, retired Chief Master Sgt. Rebecca Velazquez knew how to lead Airmen, solve problems and take care of people. What she did not expect was how difficult it would be to step away from the identity that had shaped most of her adult life.

Velazquez enlisted in 1998, her military career culminating in her role as Command Chief of the 183rd Wing.

"I struggled so bad retiring in April 2025," Velazquez said. "You lose that identity that you have. I was Chief Velazquez. I was the Command Chief of the 183rd Wing."

Velazquez, the former 183rd Wing Command Chief, is now pursuing a new career as a mental health social worker. Her goal is to work with veterans and eventually open a farm-based practice that offers equine-assisted therapy and a peaceful place where veterans can reconnect, reflect and heal.

For Velazquez, social work is not a departure from military service. It is an extension of it.

Throughout her career, she was known as a people-focused leader who believed taking care of Airmen was essential to accomplishing the mission. Her husband, Bryan, describes her leadership style as "People first, mission always," adding that she was deeply invested not only in Airmen, but also in their families.

That focus on people began early in her career as an Air Force personnelist. In this role she managed military human resource programs, career progression, and helped guide commanders on benefits, assignments, and evaluations. She then transitioned into recruiting, casualty assistance, inspections and senior enlisted leadership. She said she often found herself helping Airmen during moments of crisis, whether they were dealing with family issues, mental health concerns, substance use, injuries or uncertainty about their futures.

"I really enjoyed that part of my career," Velazquez said. "They usually don't come to you when everything is fine. They're usually in crisis, and they need assistance, and they don't know where else to go."

Her own experiences also shaped her path. Velazquez said she lived for years with anxiety and panic attacks before seeking help. She was later diagnosed with PTSD. Eventually, she realized she could not continue caring for Airmen without also caring for herself.

"I can't help an Airman if I'm

not taking care of myself," she said.

Now, as a clinical social work student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and intern at Packard Mental Health Center in Springfield, Velazquez is working with adults facing serious mental health illness, including individuals involved in the justice system who have been found unfit to stand trial or not guilty by reason of insanity. The internship has exposed her to substance use, homelessness, trauma, untreated mental illness and the challenges people face when systems fail to support them early enough.

"It's really interesting to see the level of care that these individuals are receiving," she said. "If, as a society, we cared for people more, some of those individuals may not have ended up in the situations they're in now."

Velazquez originally hoped to intern with veterans, but the opportunity at Packard has given her broader experience with mental health needs. She believes those lessons will make her a stronger social worker when she returns her focus to the veteran community.

Her long-term vision is to create a safe, farm-based space for veterans that includes equine-assisted therapy, open farm time, a stocked pond, gardening, art classes and opportunities for connection.

Lila Dilbaitis, a licensed clinical social worker and former Director of Psychological Health at the 183rd Wing, said Velazquez's military experience translates naturally to social work through leadership, crisis management skills, cultural competence and ability to build trust.

Dilbaitis said Velazquez was known for balancing mission execution with genuine care for Airmen and for advocating for service members who needed help navigating jobs, military medical systems, financial challenges or other difficult situations.

> **"Becky has always been the one to stand up and help when able. Sometimes even if she has nothing to offer but just an ear for listening."**
>
> ***Chief Master Sgt. Bryan Velazquez***
> *Husband*

Bryan said her desire to help others has always been part of who she is.

"Becky has always been the one to stand up and help when able," he said. "Sometimes even if she has nothing to offer but just an ear for listening."

Velazquez believes veterans bring an important perspective to social work because military service exposes people to different cultures, trauma, hardship and resilience in ways many civilians may not fully understand.

"We've seen the worst of humanity, but we've also seen the best of humanity," she said.

As she moves from senior enlisted leader to future social worker, Velazquez is still doing what defined her military career, helping people through difficult moments and giving them a place to feel seen, heard, and supported.

"I'm grateful for the opportunities the Illinois Air National Guard gave me. I would encourage other service members to go after their goals. Find something you're passionate about, you're never too old to start something new."



Then-Senior Airman Rebecca Velazquez receives recognition during her early years in the U.S. Air Force. Velazquez began her military career seeking adventure and opportunity, ultimately serving 27 years and retiring as the 183rd Wing Command Chief, Illinois Air National Guard, before pursuing a new mission in mental health social work. (Courtesy photo)

217th EIS Leads Readiness Training

The 217th Engineering Installation Squadron (EIS) led readiness training, War Cry 4, June 8-11, at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center (CRTC), Michigan.

Members of the 217th, as well as the 183rd Communications Squadron, attended numerous training sessions that specifically focused on pre-deployment actions and Ready Airmen Training (RAT).

These trainings included Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) training, suicide prevention training, Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and high-yield Explosives (CBRNE) training, Perimeter Defense, Post Attack Reconnaissance (PAR) training, and team building exercises.

The 217th EIS first organized the War Cry training event in 2021. Senior Master Sgt. Aaron Behl, 217th EIS flight chief, stated, "The event is an attempt to provide an off-site training experience and break up the repetitiveness and monotony of RSD training. War Cry creates an opportunity for Airmen to experience "real-world" training in a controlled environment while incorporating team building activities and promoting comrade and espirit de corps."

Readiness training is essential for ensuring airmen are prepared and mission ready at all times. These training opportunities strengthen the unit's ability to be a fully deployable package of people, tools, and equipment. With the consistent possibility of short notice deployments, as prepared and qualified as possible to go out the door and meet mission demands.

War Cry 4 also helped to strengthen the morale within the unit and share that same spirit with other units at the 183rd. Senior Master Sgt. Behl places morale and team building as the cornerstones of this event.

"Getting out in the field and experiencing what it is like to work with our team outside of a classroom setting is paramount to not only individual morale, but understanding the contribution that EI provides to the United States Air Force," he said.



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Tanner Rivera and Staff Sgt. Brady Lingley, members of the 183rd Wing Communications Squadron, Springfield, Illinois practice perimeter defense tactics during exercise War Cry 4 at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan, June 11.



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Hunter Butcher, an engineering and installation specialist with the 217th Engineering Installation Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard assembles an M-4 during exercise War Cry 4 at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan, June 11.



Staff Sgt. Clay Crowe an engineering and installation specialist with the 217th Engineering Installation Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, adjusts a protective mask during Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and high-yield Explosives (CBRNE) training during exercise War Cry 4 at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan, June 9.

U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Danielle Dillard



U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Travis Cave, 183rd Wing installation emergency manager, Illinois Air National Guard, leads Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and high-yield Explosives (CBRNE) training during exercise War Cry 4 at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan, June 9. During War Cry 4, airmen received training in Sexual Assault Prevention, Suicide Prevention, Perimeter Defense, Chemical Warfare training, and Post Attack Reconnaissance Training.

710th Medics Train in Lifesaving Canine Casualty Care

Soldiers with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support), 108th Medical Battalion, participated in canine casualty-care training led by U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers with the 169th Medical Detachment (Veterinary Services), based at Fort Eisenhower, Georgia, at Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 7.

During the hands-on training, Soldiers practiced assessing canine casualties, controlling bleeding, applying tourniquets and bandages, establishing intravenous access, and preparing injured canines for further treatment or evacuation. The training strengthened the Soldiers' ability to provide immediate, lifesaving care to military working dogs when veterinary personnel may not be readily available.



Photos by Spc. Davanh B. Sanamixay, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs



BROTHERHOOD BORN IN BATTLE

Veterans Reflect on Role in 2013 Defense of Forward Operating Base Ghazni

What Began as 'Normal' Day for Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers in Afghanistan Ends with 6-Hour Battle as Taliban Insurgents Attack Forward Operating Base Ghazni

Story by Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

An old adage describes a normal day in war as "months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror."

Such can be said of Aug. 28, 2013, when Taliban forces attacked Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ghazni, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device packed with approximately two-tons of explosives to breach the east perimeter of the base, allowing suicide bombers onto the FOB.

Throughout the six-hour attack, U.S., Polish, and Afghan forces endured indirect fire from rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire.





Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers serving as Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 display an Illinois state flag during the team's Freedom Salute event in early 2014. August 28 marked the 13th anniversary of a Taliban attack on the base on which 16 members of the Illinois Army National Guard's Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 were deployed alongside Polish Land Forces.

Sixteen Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard deployed to FOB Ghazni in 2013 as part of Bilateral Embedded Staff Team (BEST A-11). BEST missions allowed Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers to train and deploy side-by-side with their Polish counterparts.

For Col. Chris Lawson, Command Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards, 1st Sgt. Johnny O'Brien, Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy Buttram, and Capt. Tristan Myers, Aug. 28, 2013, started out as just a normal day in Afghanistan. Until it wasn't.

"There were no real indicators something was going to happen," Edwards said.

Edwards, and Polish Army Brig. Gen. Marek Sokolowski, the commander of Task Force White Eagle at FOB Ghazni, began their day at the Tactical Operations Center, each going through paperwork and checking their computers. Lawson began his day in meetings, first with the 101st Airborne Division, and later with the Polish Army staff. Buttram began his workday at the training, education and simulations office going over the day's work plans. Myers, the battle captain, began his day in the TOC receiving the overnight update from night battle captain Master Sgt. Marcus Cox. O'Brien, as the FOB's 'mayor,' started his day on a conference call working to secure needed items.

"The only thing typical about any given day was that there was nothing typical about any given day in Afghanistan," Myers said.

Shortly before the attack, Lawson was in his room changing clothes to go workout. Edwards was at the dentist's office, accompanying Sokolowski to his appointment. Buttram was in the operations shack showing Soldiers how to get to the materials yard on the base map. At some point around midday, Myers did something he rarely did – he left the TOC.

"It was almost a weird day in the respect I left the TOC midday," said Myers. "Major Jesse Wright called me over to his office to discuss an upcoming operation."

At about 4 p.m. the 'normal' day turned into

anything but normal as an explosion tore a 100-foot hole in the FOB's perimeter wall, allowing Taliban insurgents access to FOB Ghazni.

"I'm sitting in a chair leaned up against a wall while the dentist is working on the general's teeth. We're just sitting there, laughing and bullshitting like we always do, and suddenly a horrific boom goes off and knocks me off my stool," Edwards said. "General Sokolowski and I look at each other, and our thoughts were 'this had to happen just right outside'. Both of us run out the front door to see where this hole is. There's nothing near us but as I look around, I tell him it's near the Copperhead Compound where the unmanned aerial vehicles are kept."

The two jumped into the general's vehicle and started toward the TOC to manage things.

Meanwhile, Buttram found himself on the floor in the operations shack from the blast. He checked to make sure he and the other Soldiers in his office were okay.

"For a brief moment, everything was disoriented. My instinct was to check myself for injuries," Buttram said. "I looked around the room and made sure everyone else was okay before moving to the operations shack door."

In the S-3 shop, the next thing Myers remembered was picking himself up off the floor.

"There's a loud explosion, and suddenly I'm on the floor, my head is ringing, I have tunnel vision, and I look over and see Dan and Jesse," Myers said. "I think Jesse's up at this point and he's yelling asking if I'm okay."

Lawson said he was in his room changing into workout clothes when the percussion lifted the roof off his building.

"The blast knocked me down and blew the doors off mine and Sergeant Major Edwards' rooms,"

"The only thing typical about any given day was that there was nothing typical about any given day in Afghanistan."

Capt. Tristan Myers
BEST A-11 Battle Captain



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers, along with Polish Land Forces, Afghan National Army Soldiers, and tenant units deployed to Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, work to reconstruct a perimeter wall and seal a breach caused when Taliban insurgents blew up a truck filled with explosives Aug. 28, 2013. Sixteen Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan as Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 alongside Polish Land Forces when the attack occurred.

Lawson said. "I don't know how long I was out because when I got off the ground, all I heard outside was gunfire."

As Edwards and Sokolowski headed toward the TOC, they saw smoke rising into the air.

"There's several rocket propelled grenades being launched into the FOB now," Edwards said. "We stop and jump out of the general's vehicle. A Polish Soldier runs by. The general grabs him, takes his rifle and body armor and throws it on and sends the Polish Soldier back to safety."

In the operations shack, Buttram opens the door and said it was white outside.

"I yelled outside to see if anyone was hurt," he said. "I realized I needed to gear up, so I grabbed my battle rattle. By then the dust cloud began to clear and I could see a massive mushroom cloud rising at the rear of the base."

Elsewhere on FOB Ghazni, O'Brien was caught by surprise.

"Once they called FOB Con Black, I grabbed Polish Army Captain Guaus' Body Armor and threw it on," he said. "My body armor was in my room. I had my 9mm sidearm but was wishing I had a long rifle at that time."

O'Brien said at least he had a firearm.

"We started hearing booms, explosions, and gunfire. The gunfire seemed like it was coming from everywhere. It was all around us," he said.

O'Brien described the moment as confusing.

"It was like 'what is going on right now?" he said. "Captain Guaus came back to grab his stuff, so I took off his body armor."

From inside the S-3 shop, Myers said the first assumption was that a rocket had struck nearby. He stumbled through the door and looked across the courtyard.

"I saw a massive mushroom cloud, five or six stories high," Myers said. "It was the largest one I've ever seen. My first instinct was to run toward the blast. I enlisted as an infantryman and everything in me said to move toward the breach and fill the gap."

Instead, he forced himself to turn right and run back into the TOC. It went against his training and instinct, and he said he carried shame for not running directly to the breach. Only later did he understand that the TOC was where he needed to be.

"As the battle captain, my role was not to fight at



An aerial view of Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan. August 28 marks the 13th anniversary of a Taliban attack on the base on which 16 members of the Illinois Army National Guard's Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 were deployed alongside Polish Land Forces.



A Blackhawk helicopter provides aerial support above Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan.

the breach but to coordinate the defense of the FOB and help save lives across the base," he said.

As Buttram exited the operations shack, the white cloud began to dissipate.

"Gunfire began erupting across the base," Buttram said. "Most of the gunfire seemed to be coming from the direction of the explosion. We could hear gunfire from several other directions across the installation."

"We started moving toward the blast site when Myers' voice came across the base loudspeaker 'FOB Con Black. I repeat FOB Con Black. Enemy are inside the base,'" Buttram said. "We realized the situation had escalated drastically. We were no longer just responding to an explosion, enemy fighters had breached the base perimeter."

"General Sokolowski and I headed toward the outer perimeter of where Copperhead is," Edwards said. "As we get there, an insurgent is laying on the ground just outside the compound. We engage and neutralize him."

Edwards said that outside the compound is a runway that goes out with three or four containers on the left side.

"General Sokolowski and I are looking in that direction and as we do, another insurgent comes around the end of the containers running toward us," he said. "We engage him and he falls."

Edwards said they engaged and neutralized three insurgents.

"I look behind me at the five-gallon fuel cans behind us in the tent," Edwards said. "One has a bullet hole in it and fuel is pouring out. I grab the general and tell him we have to go as I tell him about the fuel leak."

"All I had was my 9mm sidearm," he said. "As soon as I engaged the third insurgent, I noticed my slide had locked back. I was out of ammunition. I dropped the magazine and as I reached down, I realized I wasn't wearing my body armor just my Army uniform. I thought 'now what do I do?'"

Edwards said he told Sokolowski he's out of ammunition and a U.S. Navy lieutenant commander offered Edwards his rifle.

As they head to the TOC, they meet up with O'Brien.

"I met up with Sergeant Major Edwards between where I was and the TOC where he was headed," O'Brien said. "We needed to get an accountability for all of the BEST Soldiers. There was one we hadn't heard from yet and communication was terrible. Not everyone had cell phones, we didn't have radios, and that made it difficult to get in contact with everyone on the spur of the moment."

O'Brien and Edwards set out to locate the unaccounted-for Soldier.

"I'm walking with Sergeant Major Edwards and I told him I really wish I had my stuff with me," O'Brien said. "He hands me an M4. Our equipment had close combat optic or advanced combat optical gunsight for sites. The M4 he handed me didn't have anything. I ask him where he got this."

O'Brien said Edwards tells him how he came in possession of the M4.

While O'Brien and Edwards were looking for the Soldier, they went to O'Brien's room where he grabbed his body armor and M4. It was there the two found the Soldier, on the roof in a defensive position.

"I remember walking around with the sergeant major who was very big on checking on everyone and making sure they were where they needed to be," O'Brien said.

Lawson said he didn't know how long he was out before getting up off the ground.

"All I heard was gunfire outside," he said. "I grabbed my weapon, locked and loaded, and went out the back door because that's where the explosion came from."

Lawson said as soon as he exited the building,



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers who served alongside Polish Land Forces, Afghan National Army Soldiers, and other U.S. troops, pause for a group photo just days after Taliban insurgents attacked Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, Aug. 28, 2013.

there were rockets coming into the base.

"We had a bunch of holes from rockets and grenade launchers on the back of our building," he said. "We found out later those were coming from suicide bombers that had come in and were outfitted with grenade launchers and incendiary accelerants. They had ropes with cans around their neck where they can put on buildings and light them on fire."

Lawson said he headed toward the TOC and an RPG came in front of him where the first of the 10th Mountain Division Headquarters was at.

"They have what's called CHIGOs. They are split units, an air conditioner and a heater," he said. "That RPG hit that CHIGO and blew it up. I hit the ground and waited. I'm like, 'okay, I'm alright,' and get up."

Lawson said he kept running to the TOC and was thankful the base had running passwords.

"Everyone on the FOB has weapons in the ready and you're running around corners," he said. "So you'd run around a corner and have muzzles in your face because they didn't know if you're a good guy or bad guy. I'm glad we had it because I probably used it 20 times with people staring me down with their weapons. They know me, but when you're frightened that happens."

Edwards said he and Sokolowski got in the general's vehicle and headed toward the TOC.

"We get to the TOC where you can get a better idea of what's going on from the video screens," Edwards said. "There was a huge plume of fire and smoke that enveloped the area at Copperhead."

Edwards said it's important to note Sokolowski was to the left of him during the engagements.

"We get to the TOC and I look over at General Sokolowski and he had a rip in the sleeve of his uniform with some blood," Edwards said. "The general had caught a piece of buckshot in his shoulder. When the second insurgent we engaged fell, he detonated his vest. His vest was filled with buckshot. When the vest detonates buckshot goes everywhere and the general got hit in the arm. I feel fortunate that being right there, I didn't get injured."

Edwards was fortunate indeed.

Buttram said FOB Ghazni was laid out like a maze, built from HESCO barriers. Because of the layout there wasn't a straight path to the blast site, and we had to maneuver through the base to reach it.

"As we moved through the FOB, we could hear multiple explosions nearby," Buttram said. "Those were RPG strikes fired by Taliban fighters attacking the base from multiple directions. As we reached an opening near the helicopter runway, another RPG struck a drone fuel pod, causing it to explode and catch fire. That way was blocked."

Buttram said the three navigated through the dining facility supply area.

"While moving through that area, two additional RPGs struck food supply containers causing additional fires," he said. "We quickly extinguished them and continued pushing toward the blast site."

When they reached an opening that gave a clear view of the perimeter, they could see the scale of the damage.

"There was a massive breach about 100 feet long in the barrier wall," Buttram said. "The breach was caused by a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device from a jingle truck. A jingle truck is just a cargo truck. But in Afghanistan, they decorate everything. They had decorations on that truck with little metal things that jingle. We called them jingle trucks. This guy had pulled up right next to the base wall, got out and he detonated it from the front. When it detonated it had pulverized 100 feet of sand, which

is thousands of cubic tons of sand."

Buttram said the truck had been loaded with approximately 4,000 lbs. of explosives.

He described the barrier walls measuring about seven feet tall, seven feet wide, and seven feet thick. The wall was constructed with two barriers at the base and a second single layer stacked across the top.

As they assessed the breach, Buttram said Wisniewski turned to him and said 'that hole needs to be fixed. Do you think you can find a way to close it up?'

"During the past five months on FOB Ghazni, I had built relationships with several tenant units across the base," Buttram said. "Because of those connections, I knew immediately what needed to be done. I shared my plan with Major Wisniewski. Master Sergeant Foster and I set out on foot across the base to gather manpower and equipment."



A view from inside Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan.

Buttram said they stopped at three different units, coordinating support and directing Soldiers to assist with rebuilding the wall.

"The biggest challenge was none of the units had heavy equipment to fill the barriers with sand," he said. "My last stop was the local national equipment motor pool, where construction equipment was stored. The yard housed dozers, excavators, forklifts, and most importantly – a front loader."

Buttram said he got into the front loader and his heart sank as he realized there were no keys.

"There were no keys, but two bare wires were hanging down," he said. "I held my breath, touched the wires together and the engine fired up. I thought 'well today I'm going to steal a front loader.' I drove it to the meetup site and as a unit went to the wall."

Buttram said part of the problem to figure out was how to fill the enormous crater in the ground.

"We couldn't put the walls there because it wouldn't do anything," he said. "I used the front loader and filled it as much as I could then we built a wall parallel to the crater. We didn't fill in the gap, but making a bubble with the barrier walls."

Buttram said over the next four hours, more than two dozen American and Polish Soldiers worked together under fire to construct a parallel wall behind the destroyed section of the perimeter, as they endured intermittent direct and indirect fire from small arms and RPGs.

"We had to hunker down and keep working," he said. "We finally got to the point where we had a wall we know was at least going to prevent people from just running in. Between the temporary wall or beginning of that new wall, we finally got to the point while we were not breathing easy, we were in a better spot."

Buttram said the team was told later it was the most coordinated attack to date in the war on a base.

"The attack included the VBIED, about 15 suicide bombers and another 60 or more RPG strikes on the base," he said.

Buttram described the actions of the servicemembers working to rebuild the perimeter wall as heroic.

"Within about 45 minutes of us identifying the gigantic breach in the wall, we were rebuilding," he said. "Everyone pushed so hard, pushed themselves and each other to work hard. It was so inspiring to see that teamwork."

"My initial reaction was 'is this real'? Is this really happening?" Buttram said. "That went away quickly. As we were running through the base, there was a young private just walking around scared to death. He came up to me and asked what do I do? I gave him a sector. Told him we know enemy is on the base. I need you to watch here to here. If you see anyone

come through you have to take care of them.

"That calmness gave him a purpose," Buttram said. "When we found out there was enemy on the base, you revert to your military training. What do I do is not part of the thought process at that point. Your training is engrained. It's in there."

Buttram said from his vantage point, staying calm and working as a team were the most heroic things his team did that day.

"As we were making our way through the base toward the breach, there were explosives. There were RPGs," he said. "It would have been easy to say 'I can't do this today,' turn around and go the other way. But for us, this is happening. This is bad and we just kept going.

"Each of those two dozen Soldiers putting together that wall were heroes that day as well," he said. "We were under the continuous threat of indirect fire. We would stop long enough to be safe but we kept going. They showed no fear. They just did their job."

Buttram said the deployment changed him.

"When I left the United States, I was one person and when I came home I was someone else," he said. "Not because of what happened, but because of the people I served with. We were relying on each other to get the job done. They made me stronger and I made them stronger."

Buttram described the teamwork demonstrated while the team rebuilt the wall was "at a level he'd not seen before."

"Usually when you're working with a lot of people, it gets a little diluted or too much is happening," he said. "But between myself, Sergeant O'Brien who met me at the wall, and Derek my Polish counterpart, we were really instructing the whole piece. We weren't instructing step by step. It was 'we

"I need to get back to my five-year-old daughter. She doesn't need to hear stories of me. She needs to know me."

1st Sgt. Johnny O'Brien
BEST A-11 First Sergeant



U.S. forces inspect a crater in a road outside FOB Ghazni.

gotta get that wall up guys'. No babysitting anyone. Everyone got in there and did it while feeding off each other's energy."

Lawson said during the attack, the insurgents blew up an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

"We had a unit operating UAVs and they kept an abundance of fuel used to fuel their drones," Lawson said. "An RPG made a direct hit on it, blew it up and it was on fire. I ran into General Sokolowski and Sergeant Major Edwards who I found out later were at the point where the insurgents were coming in. We went to the TOC and the general said we got to get on this. At that point, there are multiple fires on the base. At that point I don't know where we're at or what buildings are structurally unsafe to occupy, like the mess hall."

Lawson said at that point, the three of them went to the Polish fire brigade.

"We find out that more than two-thirds of their Soldiers are going home in three days," he said. "The fire chief asks for volunteers but no one under the age of 25, which makes the Soldiers younger than 25 years old mad. He changed that to only volunteers and the fire brigade rallied to extinguish the three fires."

Once the fires were extinguished, Lawson said the fire brigade Soldiers joined in rebuilding the perimeter wall.

Lawson said that while most of BEST A-11 were working to secure the base, one Soldier was orchestrating the fight from within the TOC.

"What was great about BEST A-11 is there wasn't anyone who was a duplicate version of another teammate," Lawson said. "Captain Tristan Myers had the toughest experience. He was one of our youngest officers and as battle captain, had one of the most difficult jobs in a difficult environment. When scary things happen in the TOC, it goes Polish. By that I mean the Polish staff starts speaking Polish. The demand for information also skyrockets and Tristan was never shaken."

Lawson said when the announcement came over the speaker system the base was under attack; it was Myers who made the announcement.

"FOB Con Black, get to your fighting positions, get ready to defend at all costs," he said. "I remember thinking this is real. I didn't know it was Tristan's job to give announcements when we're being attacked."

Lawson said once things slowed down, Myers wouldn't leave the TOC.

"I'm like Tristan, we've got Marcus for the night shift," he said. "You need to get some sleep. But none of us slept for 48 hours."

Myers believed the decision to run to the TOC reflected something Sokolowski had seen in him when he was selected as the battle captain during



Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter presents the Bronze Star Medal for valor to Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards Sept. 15, 2013, on Forward Operating Base Ghazni. Edwards was recognized for his actions during an insurgent attack Aug. 28, 2013, on the base. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Les Long)

training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

"If I was not in the TOC, then no one was coordinating the defense, answering questions or directing the response," he said.

When Myers reached the TOC, the room was in disarray. Monitors and indicators used to maintain the battle space were offline. Doors had been blown off buildings.

"The first thing I say is get me some flipping eyes on the breach. I'm talking a little bit in Polish, asking them to get a monitor up. Phones are ringing, radios are chattering, and everything's all happening at once," Myers said.

Once he saw enough to understand the threat, he moved to the public address system and issued the alert of FOB Condition Black – the highest threat level. The FOB was under attack, the perimeter had been breached, and insurgents were attempting to overrun the base.

Myers told his Polish counterparts to contact the Afghan National Army to establish an outer cordon immediately. With the breach still active and the number of insurgents uncertain, he needed friendly forces outside the perimeter and clear communication to avoid confusion.

The Afghan forces responded quickly, moving to establish the outer cordon. Because the situation was confusing and fast-moving, Myers later used the loud

speaker to make it clear Afghan Army forces were outside the FOB and should not be mistaken for the attackers.

At the same time, Myers said attackers were also moving on the west side of the FOB. Multiple vehicles pulled up near the hotel complex and people began unloading weapons, including RPGs. They did not appear to realize a Polish sniper team was already positioned there, watching the activity unfold.

The sniper team waited until the final person unloaded the last piece of equipment, then shot them all, ending the western prong of the attack before it could begin.

Buttram said the attack on FOB Ghazni brought the members of BEST A-11 close.

"We all experienced something that no one should ever have to experience, but it did. It happened to us," he said. "You always wonder what if something extreme happens? How am I going to handle it? We all handled it extremely well. I know what Sergeant Foster and I did, running around and getting all those things. I know what that felt like, but everyone has their own story. Everyone experienced the attack their own way."

Buttram said the group didn't talk about it a lot initially.

"It wasn't until a couple of weeks later Sergeant Major Edwards and I were sitting out back and really started talking about it," Buttram said. "That was the first time I think he talked about his experience that day. By that time, I had developed a strong friendship with a lot of the guys there, but I had an extraordinary relationship with Sergeant Major Edwards."

Buttram said he couldn't have that conversation at that level with the other team members.

"My connections with those guys are different," Buttram said. "They are my best friends but in different ways. I don't see them every day. But when we say we'll give our life for anyone out there. There's not a day in time when we wouldn't do anything for those guys."

Buttram, who received a Bronze Star partly for his actions that day, said one of the other awards he received meant more to him.

"I was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal," he said. "First Sergeant O'Brien and I were each awarded the medal by the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy in recognition of the things we did. That one holds a special place because as a Soldier in the Army, cross-service awards don't happen very often."

Buttram said training was the key to the deployment's success and the team's actions during the attack.

"It's leadership," Buttram said. "It's the people you serve with. I'd go anywhere with General Lawson.



When I got a chance to meet him in recruiting, he motivated us to change as people really blew me away. When I was selected to serve under his command during the 2013 deployment, that same power came from him. He drove strength into us every day."

Buttram said the attack was worrisome for the families at home.

"When the attack occurred our families were notified," Buttram said. "They were aware the base was under attack. We were going through all of these things and the next morning when I had a chance to regroup, I fired up the computer and just do a quick 'hey how's it going?' She'd been up for the last 12 hours, not knowing if her husband is alive or dead."

Buttram said at that moment he realized what families go through when loved ones deploy.

"It's not just that person who deploys," he said. "Families deploy as well. She took care of the house. She did things she never did before. She was proud of it and I was proud of her for it. But it was that moment you know she had been facing the unknown. She was there with family and friends wondering what's happening. When I finally got a chance to talk to her and tell her things were good, I could see the relief on her face. She had been through her own type of battle. They all did, all the spouses of the BEST team."

As small teams, the Soldiers serving on BEST missions wear multiple hats.

"My role on the BEST mission was to descope or reduce the size of the base," Buttram said. "It turned into a handoff mission to the Afghan National Army. One month I was looking for different places to tear down or restructure. The next month I was building up a compound for the Afghan National Army."

Buttram said he wasn't sure what to make of the attack initially.

"The very first thing I thought as the attack started was is this real?" he said. "I can still remember my thought process was, this happened but it feels like a dream. I feel like I'm in a movie right now. Is this really happening? That went away quickly."

Buttram said the deployment changed him.

"I'm a better person. I'm a stronger person. It took some time to react with me when I got back home. I wouldn't change it. From a Soldier perspective I got a chance to prove to myself I could do it and that felt good," he said. "I've been in leadership roles most of my career, both in the military and my civilian career. I've always had the ability to talk to people. It was always difficult for me to say no a lot of times. I didn't have the same backbone that maybe other people did. When I came home, I definitely had more backbone. My wife said I left a girl and came back a man."

O'Brien said the first thing he thought when the assault started was 'holy moly'.

"The initial push by the insurgents was crazy," O'Brien said. "Holy cow, this is real."

O'Brien said walking around with Edwards seeing the different unexploded RPGs and the craters was chaos. But weighing heavy on his mind was getting home to his five-year-old daughter.

"If I got to go, I'm going to go like this," he said. "My thoughts were I need to get back to my five-year-old daughter. She doesn't need to hear stories of me. She needs to know me."

While O'Brien said he didn't witness acts of heroism, he heard a few heroic stories.

"The things that stand out in my mind are Sergeant Buttram stealing the front loader, and putting out fires behind the dining facility," O'Brien said. "I saw Sergeant Major Edwards was eliminating the threats of suicide bombers running onto the base. Those are some things I heard firsthand because of my teammates."

"As we go on, we hear about Staff Sergeant Michael Ollis who was killed. It was a big deal because he was killed shielding a Polish officer," he said. "What was he doing? Come to find out he was just in transit. I think he was supposed to leave the next morning to go to Bagram and then go home."

O'Brien said that's an inspiring story because it shows true brotherhood.

"It doesn't matter. Team up with a Polish counterpart that you just met," he said. "No language needed, just a common goal. Stop the threat and save lives."

Edwards said in his view Buttram was one of the battle's heroes.

"We're still under attack and we have an exposed perimeter wall that anyone could walk through," Edwards said. "He grabbed up a crew, including Polish, Afghan and American Soldiers, local nationals and orchestrated the rebuilding of the wall. He was like, 'we're not quitting until this wall's put back together'. He and his group worked through the night, building that wall back up to where we had a defensive wall. In my view, that was heroic."

O'Brien said the brotherhood forged in battle has brought the team closer.

"Knowing everyone was doing what they were supposed to do throughout the night just brought us all closer together," he said. "Not everyone gets to experience something like that. Those who do, the people who you are with, the bond is forever. It's never going to be broken."

Edwards agreed.



The dining facility reopened about 30 days after it sustained damage in the Aug. 28, 2013 attack on Forward Operating Base Ghazni.

"You develop a bond with these guys that is going to be forever," he said. "They all did the right things at the right times, stepping up. When you go through something like that together you develop a closeness. We're scattered everywhere but at a moment's notice I could call any one of those guys and say I need help, they would call the others and all be here. The same goes if any of them called me. It's not out of anything more than we've been through something together."

O'Brien said of the military medals and accolades he received for his actions that day, the most important one is the Afghan Star awarded by the Polish Army.

"All 16 members of the BEST mission received them," he said. "I didn't really know the importance of it until Staff Sergeant Ollis' family was presented one. This is a big deal."



Damage from daily mortar attacks by insurgents.

O'Brien said he hopes BEST A-11 is remembered in history for their accomplishments.

"We did what we needed to do," he said. "We built an international bond that's forever. It's solid and will never be broken. The international friendships that are there are phenomenal but knowing that we played a key part in the FOB Ghazni defense is all you can really ask for."

Edwards said the events which happen during combat answer a lot of questions in any Soldier's mind.

"Every soldier who hasn't experienced actual combat has questions which always sits in the back of their mind. We all ask ourselves am I the guy? Would I step up whenever needed?," he said. "What happened that day answered in my mind of who I am and if I'm the Soldier who would step up whenever it's needed," he said. "It changed my outlook a lot on things after I got home about what's important. There's a lot of things people think are important but when you experience something like that, you realize what is truly important."

Edwards said he is thankful for the experience.

"As bad as it sounds, I'm thankful for the experience," he said. "I'm thankful I had the chance to be the guy who was at the breach to help do the little bit I did. I'm fortunate in so many ways. I came home unscathed and mostly undamaged."

Lawson said one of the first things following the initial blast that ran through his mind was training works.

"I know I probably had a concussion, but there was stuff to do," he said. "I automatically was doing it without even thinking about it. The other thing is I was proud of our leadership. General Sokolowski and Sergeant Major Edwards led from the front resulting in the general's injury. They say Soldiers do things no one else wants to do. You have dead insurgents on base. Someone has to pick them up. It's up to the base Soldiers to take care of this."

Lawson said one of his biggest challenges following the attack was keeping Soldiers' minds on the mission.

"Keeping the team together, not distracted, because you don't know what is going to happen any given day," he said. "We would have a team huddle every Sunday. You had to stay in your team's heads and you had to be able to maintain a brotherhood where you could tease each other but also make behavioral corrections."

Lawson said he needed accountability of the team after the initial blast.

"You have to know where all your people are," he said. "Some people can get this information quickly, some can't. If you're at the gym and you're attacked, you go find cover. They're not getting out of that cover until the all clear is given. We're not going to give an all clear until the base is clear. You then had to go find people. Accountability was my first order of business."

Lawson said accountability was a challenge because of the dynamic of the team.

"The team is organized for all of them to be independent," Lawson said. "They're one deep so not necessarily out as a buddy team. They're out handling their business, so they're all over the base. We had accountability on all but one of the Soldiers. I'm out

back talking to the sergeant major and I hear someone say 'sir'. I look up and he's in a fighting position on top of the roof. He said I figured I needed to get a fighting position so he just picked it. It took us a couple of hours to find him."

Lawson said he's proud of the heroic actions taken by the team that day.

"Sergeant Major Edwards responded to the suicide bombers without his M4 carbine," Lawson said. "A Navy lieutenant also credits Sergeant Major Edwards for saving the lives of the people in his unit personally."

Lawson also credits Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Clemens for running toward the gunfire.

"Chief Clemens, who was probably close to 60, ran to the gunfire as well with his weapon," Lawson said.

He said the two Soldiers who most impressed him were Myers and Cox.

"The two I'm most impressed with were Tristan Myers and Marcus Cox. I think Tristan knew more Polish than Marcus, but when all this happened the TOC goes Polish immediately," he said. "There's no one speaking English so having to translate because the Polish didn't want to take to explain it. Tristan and Marcus had a difficult time because everyone wanted information right then. Everything slowed down so much because of the language barrier."

Lawson said he's proud of the brotherhood formed as a result of the deployment.

"I'm proud of the pre-mobilization training because I can look back and say we made some strong connections during that time with our Polish counterparts," he said. "During, and after, the attack, everyone got in where they fit and were doing things they weren't asked to do. They were willing to risk their own life to do this. You can't not get emotional about it. You have all these people who when it came time to do your very best in the most stressful of situations just got it and did it. We laughed. We cried. I couldn't have been blessed with a better team."

Lawson makes it a point to stay connected with the members of the team.

Myers said he sought out serving on the BEST mission.

Myers said as an intelligence officer, he thought he would be assigned to the intelligence shop, and get to have a really cool experience working with Polish intelligence section.

Myers said during training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Sokolowski selected him to serve as the battle captain.

"Being a battle captain in the operations world, but having an intel background, I always looked at things with intel shaded glasses," he said. "There was always talk of this grand attack that was going to happen on FOB Ghazni. FOB Ghazni was a very high profile target. We didn't just take it with a grain of salt, but there was so much noise we did the best we could with the intel that we had. With all of my intel training I've had, there's always this joke of when the talking stops, when the noise stops and things get quiet, that's when the attack is going to happen. I won't say that was the exact case in this instance, because even that morning we had reports of attacks coming. It's one of my one of my regrets as an intel officer, I couldn't see it coming. That's been my entire job as a commissioned officer."

Myers said even after 13 years, the team gets together as much as possible.

"I'm one of the younger guys on the team," he said. "I've got younger kids so I haven't been able to attend as much as I would like. But even without the attack, just because of the things we experienced as a team, it was a huge bonding experience anyway. Those are relationships that are going to last for a lifetime. When we get together, we have a good time. We have a few drinks to celebrate our brotherhood, the good times and sometimes the hard times."

"I'm thankful I had the chance to be the guy who was at the breach to help do the little bit I did."

Command Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards
BEST A-11 Command Sergeant Major

‘The Godfather’ Flies into Retirement

Story and Photos by Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens’ 42 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard was celebrated during a retirement ceremony July 16 at the Army Aviation Support Facility (AASF) 2, Decatur.

‘The Godfather’ as noted on his flight helmet enlisted in the Illinois Army National in 1983, at the age of 17.

“I was 11 years old when Herb enlisted,” said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. “From the showing of retirees and former aviators today, only Herb can fill the tarmac and this building on a Thursday in Decatur.”

Williams thanked Stevens’ family for their support of his career.

“It takes a village to support a Soldier through 42 years of service,” Williams said. “No one in uniform does this without a support structure at home.”

Stevens is one of seven Soldiers serving in the Illinois Army National Guard carrying the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 5. Williams put it in perspective for Stevens’ family.

“There are 10,000 Soldiers serving in the Illinois Army National Guard,” he said. “Chief Warrant Officer 5 is the pinnacle of a career for a Warrant Officer. It’s not impossible to make that rank, but it is very challenging.”

Throughout his 42 years of service, Stevens served in a variety of aviation positions and locations. He was part of a 50-Soldier detachment that moved from Decatur to start AASF 3 in Peoria. Steven rose to the rank of sergeant and was chosen to attend Warrant Officer Candidate School and flight training in 1990.

After flight school, Stevens was assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment in Peoria. In 1992, Stevens participated in Task Force New Horizons in Panama, and in 1993, he was a UH-1 (Huey) pilot supporting relief efforts during the Mississippi River flood operations.

In 1994, Stevens qualified in the UH-60 Blackhawk, and a UH-60 pilot, participated in Task Force New Horizon missions in Honduras. He then completed the UH-60 Instructor Pilot course in early 2001.

Stevens deployed twice during his four decades of military service. He deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2005 at Balad Air Base, and a second time from 2008 to 2010.

Upon return from his second deployment he was chosen as the 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment Standardization Pilot and transferred to the headquarters in Peoria. After three



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens, right, State Standardization Pilot and Commander of Army Aviation Support Facility 1 in Kankakee, is joined by Chief Warrant Officer 3 Daniel Wentworth, Illinois Army National Guard Instructor Pilot, on Stevens’ final flight July 16 as an Army Aviator in the Illinois Army National Guard.



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens, State Standardization Pilot and Commander of Army Aviation Support Facility 1 in Kankakee, is greeted by his family, including wife, Lynette, and daughters Hanna Stevens and Maggie Dhami, following Stevens' final flight as an Army Aviator July 16 in the Illinois Army National Guard.

years in the position, Stevens was assigned to the C12 fixed wing unit to assist with a deployment in Djibouti, Africa. In early 2015, he returned to the 106th. In 2017, he was selected as the State Aviation Safety Officer in Joint Force Headquarters. Stevens attended Senior Warrant Officer education course and was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer 5 in 2019. In 2019, he became the State Standardization Pilot.

Williams said when he thinks of Stevens, three words come to mind – respect, credibility, and legacy.

"As you get to the end of your career, you begin to ask yourself have I earned the respect of those I lead, do I have credibility with the Soldiers I serve with, and what will my legacy be?" Williams said. "Herb Stevens' legacy is intact. His legacy is in this room, across this organization, in the retirees who were here today, and his legacy is in the ones he's advised and mentored coming up behind him in this organization."

Williams, who with Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, Command Chief Warrant Officer of the Illinois National Guard, joined Stevens on his final flight as an Army aviator earlier in the day, said Stevens talked about the next generation of aviators.

"He didn't talk about himself, his career or his deployments, but those coming up behind him. Those he's helped raise in this organization," Williams said. "That's Herb's legacy. Because of the ones he's raised his legacy will last 20 plus years. There may be a young Chief Warrant Officer 2 right now in the cockpit and they may have 20 more years of flying. They will remember what Herb taught them. That's generational influence. When you take the uniform off for the last time later today, I want you to know the impact you made on this organization."

Stevens reflected back on his first drill in December 1983 at the AASF in Decatur.

"In December 1983, I stood back there for my first drill," he said. "Here we are forty two years and eight months later."

Stevens said his career was defined by two different eras.

"The first 20 years of my career, I was a drilling Soldier," he said. "Then September 11 happened. I think the trajectory of our careers changed vastly because of that. The next 22 years of my career were very different."

Stevens said he knew what he wanted to do even before he was old enough to enlist.

"I think I knew when I was 15 years old what I wanted to do," he said. "It was this (helicopter pilot) in one form or another. Who gets to do what they have wanted to do since they were 15 years old for 42 years of their life? I'm grateful to my family for letting me do this."

Stevens, who talks often with young Soldiers and new recruits they will encounter roadblocks and challenges as part of their life.

"Respect, credibility, and legacy are all part of overcoming those challenges," he said. "Whether it's during a deployment or a normal duty day, be that person a commander can count on."

Stevens said he is proud to be part of the Illinois National Guard.

"I appreciate everyone I served with and with those I serve now," he said. "This organization will be successful for the next twenty years and beyond. We have great Soldiers coming in and coming up the ranks."

Stevens thanked his family for their support.

"I want to thank my family for being my support system," he said. "They are the ones who suffered the most during the past 42 years."

Stevens may have flown for the last time as an Army Aviator, but he hasn't put away his flight helmet just yet. In a couple of weeks, Stevens will begin his new job as a medical evacuation pilot for OSF Illinois.

Illinois National Guard leader visits Air Forces Southern

Story and photos by
Tech. Sgt. Rachel Maxwell
Air Forces Southern

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, visited the 12th Air Force, Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH) headquarters on July 8. The visit gave Illinois senior leaders a firsthand look at how one Air National Guard Unit quietly expands AFSOUTH's operational capacity.

The visit reinforced the partnership between AFSOUTH, the 612th Air Operations Center (AOC) and the Illinois Air National Guard's 183rd Air Operations Group (AOG), highlighting how Guardsmen seamlessly integrate with their active-duty counterparts to provide the planning expertise, command and control capabilities and operational depth needed to respond to day-to-day operations, contingencies and regional crises across the Western Hemisphere.



U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander, Illinois National Guard, left, shakes hands with Illinois Air National Guard Lt. Col. Brad Dunford, right, chief combat operations assigned to the 183rd Combat Operation Squadron, during a tour at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, July 8. Airmen assigned to the 183rd Air Operations Group augment multiple divisions within the 612th Air Operations Center, providing operational planning and command and control expertise supporting contingency operations across the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.



U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, holds an all-call with Airmen assigned to the 183rd Air Operations Group (AOG), Illinois Air National Guard, at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, July 8. Boyd met with Airmen assigned to the 183rd AOG to discuss their role providing operational planning and command and control expertise in support of 12th Air Force, Air Forces Southern.

"We provide augmentation across every division of the 612th Air Operations Center and AFSOUTH staff. We aren't limited to one specialty," said U.S. Air National Guard Col. Matthew Cain, 183rd Air Mobility Operations Squadron commander. "We bring the full spectrum of command and control capabilities needed to support the mission."

Air National Guardsmen from the "Prairie State" arrived at AFSOUTH headquarters in Tucson, Arizona, in September 2025, as U.S. military forces deployed to the Caribbean in support of the U.S. Southern Command mission, Department of War-directed operations, and the president's priorities to disrupt illicit drug trafficking and protect the homeland.



U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Henry Jeffress, 12th Air Force, Air Forces Southern deputy commander, left, holds an office call with U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander, Illinois National Guard, right, during a visit to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, July 8. Leaders discussed how Air National Guard Airmen assigned to the 183rd Air Operations Group integrate with active-duty personnel to expand headquarters planning and command and control capacity.

"At the onset of Operation Southern Spear, it was apparent across the Directorates that we had experience gaps in our staffs that prevented on-demand solutions to tactical warfighting problem sets," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Brandon O'Neil, AFSOUTH deputy director for logistics, engineering, and force protection. "Our long-standing relationship with the 183rd allowed us to bring in the specific capability support to augment our teams, giving warfighters the required advisement and assistance to overcome real-time operational challenges."

The relationship didn't happen overnight. It started with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts and continued through command and control exercises such as PANAMAX. Over the years of operating together, those missions built trust, interoperability and shared experience that now allow Guard and active-duty Airmen to integrate seamlessly when operational demands increase.

"It's much more complicated to command and control air forces than it is to fly a single aircraft. Every theater is different," said Cain. "The command relationships, access and priorities all change. Our Airmen have built the experience to navigate those environments quickly."

For O'Neil, the partnership's greatest value wasn't simply additional manpower, it was the operational expertise the 183rd brought to the fight. That experience enabled the air component to adapt as the mission evolved while reinforcing the strength of Total Force integration.

"The 183rd provided operational advantages from day one of operations through current steady-state, often working behind the scenes to provide expert level advisement and foresight," said O'Neil. "That's the strength of Total Force integration. We are stronger and more decisive when we operate as one force."

After seeing the work firsthand, Boyd said the visit reinforced the value the 183rd brings to AFSOUTH while demonstrating how Air National Guard Air Operations Groups provide critical command and control expertise in support of commandant commanders.

"In the Guard, you are only as successful as you are relevant. The work you are doing here proves the 183rd is relevant," said Boyd. "One of the reasons I wanted to come here was so I could better appreciate what you are doing and what you are bringing to the fight. No one outside this mission truly understands that unless they see it firsthand."

Award-Winning Illinois Army National Guard Soldier Promoted to First Sergeant

Chad Wille, a career-long member of the Illinois Army National Guard, was promoted to first sergeant during an Aug. 14 ceremony at the Woodstock Armory.

The promotion recognizes his exceptional leadership and dedicated service to the state and nation. Lt. Col. Lance Frail, commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion, presided over the ceremony and commended Wille's outstanding career and his impact on future Soldiers.

"First Sergeant Wille represents the very best of our NCO Corps," Frail said. "He is a leader who cares deeply for both the mission and his personnel, and that profound commitment is reflected in the excellence of his team. His focus on developing and mentoring those under his charge is the true measure of leadership — one he meets with high honors. Keep being the leader you are. It's working."

Wille, a resident of Huntley, Illinois, begins his new role as the first sergeant of Company H ("The Honey Badgers") of the Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP), where he will oversee the training, development, and preparation of newly enlisted National Guard Soldiers before they ship to the Army's basic combat training.

"A promotion is never really about one person. The rank on your chest might be yours, but the accomplishments behind that rank belongs to a team," Wille said. "Every success I've had has been because of the NCOs, Soldiers, leaders, friends, and family around me. To my NCOs — thank you for your hard work, your dedication, and especially for the times you've picked up the slack, challenged me, or simply got the job done without needing to be asked. Leadership is a team sport, and I'm incredibly fortunate to have the team I do."



1st Sgt. Chad Wille's daughter affixes his new first sergeant rank to his uniform during his Aug. 14 promotion ceremony at the Woodstock Armory in Woodstock, Illinois. Wille has been the acting first sergeant of the award-winning Illinois Army National Guard Company H, Recruit Sustainment Program, for several months. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Dustin Stech, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

Wille's military career spans more than 16 years in the Illinois Army National Guard. He began his service on Sept. 11, 2009, as a traditional (drill status) Soldier with the 2-123rd Forward Support Company in Milan, Illinois. In 2012, he entered the Active Guard Reserve (AGR) program as a recruiting and retention noncommissioned officer with Company C in Machesney Park, Illinois.

Wille took a brief hiatus from the Recruiting and Retention Battalion in 2016 to gain additional operational experience as a unit logistics noncommissioned officer with Company B, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment in Elgin, Illinois. He returned to recruiting in 2017 with Company H, shortly

after marrying his wife, Sarah.

Throughout his recruiting career, Wille has earned prominent accolades, including being named a Top 10 Recruiting and Retention NCO for four consecutive years from fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2022. Since becoming the Company H Team Leader in 2023, he has led his team to three consecutive Team of the Year wins (fiscal years 2023 to 2025) and was personally named Team Leader of the Year for each of those years.

Wille offered advice to anyone trying to accomplish something difficult. "Find someone — or something — you refuse to let down. Once you find that, you'll be amazed at what you're capable of."

His military decorations include a Meritorious Service Medal, six Army Commendation Medals, five Army Achievement Medals, two Master Sergeant Paul McDade Awards, and two Minuteman Awards. He is also a 2018 graduate of Columbia College Chicago and a 2021 graduate of the Army Mountain Warfare School.

Wille's family, including his wife, Sarah, their daughters Maren, 6, and Avery, 4, and his parents, Al and Kathy, participated in the ceremony. His daughters pinned the new first sergeant rank insignia on his uniform.

The promotion was followed by a Change of Responsibility Ceremony where Wille formally assumed responsibility for Company H from the previous first sergeant, Sgt. Maj. Matthew Serowka. The Change of Responsibility Ceremony, colloquially referred to as the 'flag toss,' involves the formal passing of the unit's guidon.



Lt. Col. Lance Frail, Commander, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, passes the Company H guidon to newly promoted 1st Sgt. Chad Wille, during the change of responsibility ceremony following Wille's promotion Aug. 14. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Dustin Stech, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

Already a Coach, Artist, and 'Brady Bunch' Dad – Army Officer Now Major

Story by Spc. Kristel Cordero
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

A.J. Peskuski has many roles in his busy life – father, husband, coach, artist, and businessman. Now he has another - U.S. Army field-grade officer.

The Illinois Army National Guard promoted A.J. Peskuski of Wheaton, to major July 19 at the General Richard L. Jones Armory in Chicago.

Peskuski is the commander of the 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment (MPAD) based at the General Jones Armory. Soldiers of the unit were joined by Peskuski's wife, Linda, and Illinois National Guard Director of Public Affairs Lt. Col. Brad Leighton to celebrate this important milestone in Peskuski's career.

A promotion from captain to major marks a significant step in an Army officer's professional development. The rank of major typically signals an officer's transition from direct, tactical leadership to broader organizational responsibilities, including mission planning, staff coordination and mentorship of junior leaders. The promotion is also a formal acknowledgment of the Army's confidence in Peskuski's ability to manage complex operations and contribute to long-term readiness.

Peskuski said the promotion reflects years of preparation and leadership experience.

"I completed multiple commands as a captain and a company commander, and with the increased rank, I'm able to take on increased responsibility," Peskuski said. "This gives me a chance to lead in another organization."



Linda Peskuski, wife of newly promoted Maj. A.J. Peskuski, pins the new rank on Peskuski's uniform during a promotion ceremony at General Jones Armory in Chicago, July 19. Peskuski, Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, was promoted to major, surrounded by family, friends and fellow Soldiers. (U.S. Army photo by. Sgt. David Ervin, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

The ceremony included the traditional pinning of Peskuski's new rank. Linda Peskuski, and Leighton, pinned Peskuski.

"A.J. has shown his dedication to the MPAD, and he takes pride in the work he does," Linda said. "When someone needs information from him, he will give his all to his job and the responsibilities that come with it."

Following the ceremony, Soldiers of the 139th MPAD and Leighton congratulated Peskuski on his promotion.

"For me, it's an absolute honor to be able to pin him. He's entering a community that is very small." said Leighton. "The Soldiers are unique and intelligent…creative… and think for themselves. He's going to have a great time with this unit."

As a civilian, Peskuski has worked for Allstate Insurance for the past 15 years. He also has coached in the American Youth Soccer Organization's Everyone Plays In our Community (EPIC) program for several years. The program is designed to provide children and adults with physical or developmental disabilities with the opportunity to enjoy soccer.

He and Linda have five adult children and two grandchildren between them. They refer to as their blended family as their own "Brady Bunch." When he isn't working, spending time with family, coaching soccer, or leading Soldiers; he's painting. He is a talented artist, working mainly with acrylics on canvas.

Route 150 Through Galesburg Dedicated in Honor of Fallen Illinois National Guard Member

Story and photos by
Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Selfless. Natural leader. A man of great character. An American hero.

Those were words used to describe Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly at a highway dedication ceremony Sept. 4 in Galesburg, Illinois.

Wehrly, who served in the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, was killed in action Nov. 3, 2005, in Ashraf, Iraq when an improvised explosive device denotated near his vehicle during patrol operations.

"As I came into town today from Rockford, I saw the road sign," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General-Army, and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "I imagine in the near future a young person will see the signs as they're traveling along Sergeant First Class Kyle Wehrly Highway, and they'll look up who Kyle was."



A replica of the Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly Memorial Highway sign which was presented to family members during a highway dedication ceremony Sept. 4 in Galesburg.

Williams said they'll learn what the Galesburg community, the Soldiers who served with Wehrly, and his family already know.

"That he was selfless, a natural leader, a loving father, and a hero," Williams said.

Williams said the highway signs help those serving in uniform keep their promise to never forget.

"Losing a loved-one in service to our nation is a sacrifice that changes a family forever," Williams said. "What hasn't changed is how deeply you love Kyle. Your strength inspires us. You carry a burden most of us will never understand."

Williams said the Soldiers serving today are Wehrly's legacy.



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers serving in Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, shown with Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly's family, were in attendance during the highway dedication ceremony honoring Wehrly Sept. 4 in Galesburg.



Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly's family, including from left, daughter, Kylee Brody, wife, Janet, father, Pastor Peter Wehrly, and mother, Nita Cross, are introduced during the Highway Dedication ceremony Sept. 4 in Galesburg.

"He trained and mentored a generation of young Illinois National Guard Soldiers who are now the 'old hats' who are teaching and guiding young Soldiers," he said. "That's Kyle's legacy."

Williams noted the Howitzer on display at the ceremony and the importance of the name Kyle stenciled onto the barrel.

"Any 13B section leader worth his weight in salt has a name on their Howitzer," Williams said. "By naming this Howitzer Kyle it keeps his memory alive and serves as a remembrance for future Soldiers serving in the battery."

Lt. Col. Jeramy Miles was Wehrly's platoon leader and deployed to Iraq.

"When asked to speak, I was nervous," Miles said. "On one hand I am always afraid I won't be able to say the right words to honor Kyle in the way he deserves to be honored and on the other hand, time is a thief. Twenty-one years later, do I remember the small details necessary to explain how much of an impact Kyle made on my life?"

Miles said as he thought it through, he realized it wasn't so much about the small details but the huge influence Wehrly had on him.

"I was able to witness how he treated other people," he said. "He genuinely cared about their well-being, their success, and the success of the unit and the mission."

Miles described Wehrly as someone with a sharp wit, a quick mind, and quite possibly his native language was sarcasm.

"He had an uncanny ability to explain why you were wrong and make you laugh about it while he did," Miles said. "For me, Kyle was a trusted sounding board and respite at the end of those long days in Iraq."

Miles said Wehrly seemed to be equipped with an internal compass where he always knew where he was and how to get where he was going.

"He brought a sense of reassurance in an austere, unfamiliar environment. You could rely on him, and he wanted it that way," Miles said. "He holds a place in our hearts, his sarcasm, devotion, character, it lives in all of us who had the pleasure and honor to know and learn from him. This highway dedication couldn't be a more fitting tribute to the navigator of all navigators, continuing to help lead us down our paths."

Galesburg Mayor Peter Schwartzman said while he never knew Wehrly, he learned a lot about him in casual conversations the past few weeks leading up to the highway dedication ceremony.

"He loved his family, Galesburg, and its people," Schwartzman said. "We were very blessed to have had Kyle in our city. May we all remember him and his contributions."

State Sen. Mike Halpin said Wehrly did what he thought he needed to do.

"He loved the Illinois National Guard," he said. "He cared about the Soldiers he led. May this highway dedication remind others the young men and women we send into harm's way are people just like us."

Halpin said when a service member sacrifices their life, that loss is carried forever by the family.

"You bear the burden so the rest of us can enjoy the freedoms

we have," he said. "Every time you pass that sign, I hope you will always think about Kyle and every American who left home to serve and never came back. Remember their courage, their families who still miss them, and the freedoms we enjoy come at a tremendous cost."

State Rep. Dan Swanson, who was Wehrly's battalion commander from 1999 to 2001, said Wehrly was called to serve his state and country.

"As a young Soldier, Kyle was one of the battalion's top gunners that year," he said. "I knew he'd go far. Kyle had tremendous courage and devotion to duty. His medals tell us how Kyle served his country and state."

Swanson said we all have a shared responsibility to remember those who sacrifice.

"We must remember those who defend freedom and make the ultimate sacrifice," he said. "Thousands will travel this road in the years ahead and I hope they pause even for a moment to remember our freedom is protected and defended by real people from real families and communities like Galesburg."

Swanson said the highway signs will ensure Wehrly's name, service, and connection to the Galesburg community will remain visible for generations.

"These signs will stand as a lasting tribute to a great Soldier, a beloved family member, and a proud son of Galesburg," he said.

Swanson thanked Wehrly's family, including father, Pastor Peter Wehrly, mother Nita Cross, wife Janet Wehrly, and daughter Kylee Wehrly Brody, who was six years old when Wehrly was killed.

"Thank you for sharing him with our state and this nation," Swanson said. "We are forever grateful for his courage, his service, and his sacrifice. It is up to us to continue his story, telling our children and our grandchildren what and who Sergeant First Class Kyle Wehrly was."

> **"He trained and mentored a generation of young Illinois National Guard Soldiers who are now the 'old hats' who are teaching and guiding young Soldiers. That's Kyle's legacy."**
>
> ***Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams***
> *Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander, Illinois Army National Guard*



The barrel of this Howitzer bears the name Kyle in honor of and as a remembrance to Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly, an Illinois Army National Guard Soldier who was killed in action Nov. 3, 2005 in Ashraf, Iraq.

Recruiting Officer, Combat Veteran Retires After 24 Years of National Guard Service

Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Jaclyn Haffer was honored Aug. 21 during a retirement ceremony at Lafore Lock VFW Post 755, Springfield, marking the culmination of more than 24 years of dedicated military service.

Haffer, an Iraq combat veteran, most recently served as the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Strength Manager for the Recruiting and Retention Battalion. She was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal during the afternoon ceremony. The award, authorized by Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, recognizes Haffer's exceptionally meritorious service and leadership across key assignments.

"It can be hard leaving an organization after putting in so much of your time and energy into making it the best you can, but getting to end my career in the Recruiting and Retention Battalion where many Soldiers start their careers has made it a lot easier," Haffer said. "This next generation has the knowledge and the skills to bring the Illinois Army National Guard to the future and I have no doubt they have everything it takes to be successful."

Haffer's military career began in August 2002 when she enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard as a unit supply specialist. Within two years, she secured her first full-time role as a federal technician in the Property Book Office in Springfield before transitioning to the Active Guard Reserve (AGR) program at the rank of specialist.

In 2007, Haffer deployed to Iraq with the Springfield-based 3637th Maintenance Company, serving as the unit armorer and administrative noncommissioned officer. Following her return in 2008, she worked as a training NCO and course manager at the 129th Regional Training Institute in Springfield.

After serving as the battalion administrative NCO for the Decatur-based 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion in 2014, Haffer enrolled in Officer Candidate School. She earned her commission as an officer in the Adjutant General Corps in 2016. Her officer career included roles as the administrative officer for the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion, training officer for the Regional Training Institute, and commander of the 1844th Transportation Company in East St. Louis, Illinois, a command she held for 20 months.

Col. Bart J. Daly, the former Human Resources Officer of the Illinois National Guard, hosted and officiated Haffer's retirement ceremony, which included a presentation of certificates and retirement gifts from Lt. Col. Lance Frail, Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion.

Family support was a focal point of the afternoon. Haffer's husband, Chad Haffer, was presented with a certificate of appreciation from the Army Chief of Staff to honor his own unselfish and devoted service during his spouse's career. Additionally, Haffer's father, retired Col. Craig Lowman, delivered the invocation and benediction.

Haffer resides in Springfield with her husband, Chad, and their three children: Tessa, 21; Maria, 7; and Isaac, 3.



Col. Bart J. Daly, the former Human Resources Officer of the Illinois National Guard, presents Maj. Jaclyn Haffer with the Meritorious Service Medal during a retirement ceremony at Lafore Lock VFW Post 755.

Quinn Honored for Nearly 3 Decades of Service and 'Creating a Family' of Soldiers

Story and photo by
Sgt. Kristel Cordero
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Sgt. 1st Class David Quinn for 28 years of military service during his retirement ceremony Aug. 10, at the Crestwood Armory.

For the last couple decades he has been a recruiter, serving in New Orleans; Gary, Indiana; and Chicagoland. During his recruiting career, he enlisted more than 250 soldiers. As a team leader for the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion's Crestwood-based Foxtrot Company, Recruit Sustainment Program, he influenced the enlistment of more than 930 Soldiers.

"It's not just putting in Soldiers. You're creating a family," Quinn said. "I changed many people's lives—meeting them from day one, and then seeing them two or three years down the line was amazing. I still have people I put in over 20 years ago reaching out to me."

Quinn enlisted in the U.S. Army on Jan. 8, 1997. After completing basic combat training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and advanced individual training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, he became a combat medic. His early career included a deployment to Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Stabilization Force while stationed at Fort Polk, Louisiana. At Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., he served as noncommissioned officer in charge of three specialty clinics during key events, including the Sept. 11 attacks, the 2002 D.C. sniper attacks, and the 2003 SARS outbreak. Later, while stationed at Camp Humphreys, South Korea, he earned the Expert Field Medical Badge operating along the Demilitarized Zone.

His spouse, Demetrie Quinn, received the Department of the Army Certificate of Appreciation for her support throughout his career. In attendance alongside Demetrie were Quinn's children—Isaiah, Destiny, Semion, Shiann, Zion, Makayla, and Makenzie—his mother Claudine Quinn, sister Teyana, brother Dasean, and distinguished guests including retired 1st Sgt. Daniel Mendoza and 1st Sgt. Veronica Hernandez.



Army National Guard Sgt. 1st Class David Quinn, left, receives the Meritorious Service Medal from Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Miller during his retirement ceremony at the Crestwood Armory in Crestwood, Aug. 10.

Reflecting on her husband's 28-year career, Demetrie shared both her pride and lighthearted anticipation for what comes next as he transitions into civilian life. "I like seeing him get a lot of achievements, and we appreciate all his hard work," Demetrie said. "I keep asking him what he's going to do, because I think he's going to be bored!"

During the ceremony, Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Miller presented Quinn with the Meritorious Service Medal signed by Brig. Gen. Lenny A. Williams, Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. Quinn also received a Presidential Certificate of Appreciation signed by President Donald J. Trump, a commendation letter from Maj. Gen. Rodney C. Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, and an official Certificate of Retirement.

Quinn's military awards and decorations include the Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal (4th Award), Army Achievement Medal (7th Award), Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Humanitarian Service Medal, Korea Defense Service Medal, Expert Field Medical Badge, NATO Medal, 10-time Top 10 Recruiter of the Year Award, and the MSG Paul McDade Award.

‘It’s About People:’ Sergeant Major Retires After 36 Years of Military Service

Story and photos by
Spc. Davanh Sanamixay
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs



Col. Shawn Nokes, the Illinois Army National Guard’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (G4), presents Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Sima with a Certificate of Appreciation from the Army Chief of Staff. Sima retired from the Illinois Army National Guard after 36 years of military service during a July 11 ceremony in the Marseilles Armory.

Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey C. Sima spent 36 years wearing the Army uniform, but when asked what mattered most, his answer wasn’t a rank, an assignment or a deployment.

“It’s about people,” he told family, friends, fellow Soldiers and military leaders gathered during his retirement ceremony, July 11, at the Illinois Army National Guard Marseilles Armory. “If I made a difference in even one Soldier’s life or career, then every sacrifice was worth it.”

That philosophy defined a career that began in 1990 when Sima enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard as a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear specialist. Over the next three and a half decades, he served in chemical, transportation and security force assistance units across Illinois, ultimately retiring as the Logistics (G4) Sergeant Major at the Illinois National Guard’s headquarters.

For Col. Shawn Nokes, who served alongside Sima for years, one word immediately comes to mind.

“Family,” Nokes said.

“From day one, he talked about his kids. Their pictures were always hanging in his office, and every day he was telling stories about them. He cared deeply about Soldiers, built relationships and never took credit for himself. He was always about the team.”

Throughout his career, Sima served as a squad leader, platoon sergeant, first sergeant, battalion command sergeant major, brigade command sergeant major and logistics sergeant major. Along the way, he mentored generations of Soldiers, earning a reputation as a leader who placed people before himself.

During the ceremony, Nokes thanked Sima’s family for the sacrifices they made throughout his military career.

“We couldn’t have served with him without your support,” Nokes said. “Thank you for allowing us to have him for so long.”

While the ceremony celebrated Sima’s accomplishments, it was equally filled with laughter. Nokes shared stories about Sima’s competitive nature, his favorite dance moves and friendly rivalries built over years of service, offering a glimpse into the relationships that extended beyond the uniform.

When Sima addressed the audience, he reflected less on milestones and more on the people who shaped his journey.

“The Army has given me far more than a part-time career,” Sima said. “It has given me lifelong friendships, opportunities to lead America’s sons and daughters, and the privilege of serving something much greater than myself.”

He thanked his mentors for challenging him, his fellow

Soldiers for trusting him, and his family for standing beside him through decades of weekend drills, annual training and deployments.

He reserved special recognition for his children — Jackson, Carter, Andrew and Gianna — acknowledging the sacrifices they made throughout his military career.

As he reflected on more than three decades in uniform, Sima said the greatest measure of success was never found in titles or positions.

Instead, it was the opportunity to influence others.

"I learned it isn't about ranks," Sima said. "It's about people."

As the ceremony came to a close, Sima retired after 36 years of service, leaving behind a legacy built not only on leadership, but on the Soldiers he mentored, the teams he strengthened and the relationships he forged throughout the Illinois Army National Guard.



Col. Shawn Nokes, the Illinois Army National Guard's Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (G4), presents Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Sima with a retirement gift. Sima retired from the Illinois Army National Guard after 36 years of military service during a July 11 ceremony in the Marseilles Armory.



Airman Caleb Rheinhardt, center, 126th Force Support Squadron, stands with the 126th First Sergeant Council's after receiving the Diamond Sharp coin from the group for the month of June at Scott Air Force Base, June 9. Rheinhardt was recognized for his hard work with the Force Support Squadron the previous two months. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)

Illinois Army National Guard Soldier Promoted from Master Sergeant to Sergeant Major

Story and photos
by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Family, friends, colleagues and fellow service members gathered Aug. 3, 2026, to celebrate U.S. Army Sgt. Maj. Kurt Russell's promotion from master sergeant to sergeant major.

Col. Shawn Nokes hosted the ceremony, which included ceremonial remarks, the reading of the promotion orders and the pinning of Russell's new rank by his wife.

The promotion orders recognized Russell's patriotism, valor, fidelity, professional excellence, demonstrated leadership and dedicated service to the Army National Guard. His promotion became effective Aug. 1, 2026.

Russell began his military career in the U.S. Navy in 1996 before joining the Illinois Army National Guard in 2005. Since then, he has served in numerous leadership and staff positions at the unit, battalion, brigade and state levels.

His assignments have included positions as a first sergeant, senior human resources noncommissioned officer, operations sergeant major and personnel management branch noncommissioned officer in charge. Russell also deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and supported the Illinois National Guard's response to several state emergencies.

During his remarks, Nokes reflected on knowing and serving alongside Russell for approximately two decades. He recalled meeting Russell when they served together in a transportation company and recognized the leadership Russell demonstrated early in his career.

"The leadership he showed as a young E-4 was astounding," Nokes said.

Nokes also remembered Russell as a calm and dependable leader during their deployment to Iraq. Russell supported nighttime operations while also performing several additional responsibilities that helped protect Soldiers and keep missions moving.



Newly promoted Illinois Army National Guard Sgt. Maj. Kurt Russell is pinned with his new rank insignia by his wife during his promotion ceremony in Illinois, Aug. 3. Russell was promoted from master sergeant to sergeant major in recognition of his demonstrated leadership, professional excellence and dedicated service to the Illinois Army National Guard.

"I knew then you were going far, and far you went," Nokes said. "Your resume speaks for itself. I'm so proud of you."

Russell's career reflects a continued commitment to military education and professional development. He has completed numerous leadership, operational and occupational courses and is currently attending the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy.

The ceremony also recognized the important role Russell's family has played throughout his military career. His wife pinned on his new rank, while family members, friends and fellow service members joined him in celebrating the milestone.

Tactical Combat Casualty Care Training Simulates Difficulties of Tactical Environment

The 126th Medical Group participated in Tactical Combat Casualty Care — Combat Medic / Corpsman training.

TCCC-CMC which is advanced Air Force medical training, it educates our corpsmen and medics on how to treat various injuries while simulating the difficulties of a real tactical environment.

This is how Air Force medics bring our Airmen home.



U.S. Air Force Tech Sgt. Brittany Roberts, 126th Medical Group, pretends to be in pain while sitting on the ground at Scott Air Force Base Aug. 12. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Beyonce' Williams)

Right, U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brittany Roberts, 126th Medical Group, medic, extracts medicine with a syringe at Scott Air Force Base Aug. 12. Roberts participated in the advanced combat casualty care course to prepare her to operate effectively as part of a tactical medical team in combat zones. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Gianna Linhorst)



U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Angelica Knecht, 126th Medical Group, guides her Airman through a training exercise at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois on Aug. 12. Knecht oversaw the advanced combat casualty care course which maintained operational readiness by applying evidence-based battlefield-tested protocols. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Gianna Linhorst)



Always Ready: 5th WMD CST Defends the Homeland

Story by Tech Sgt. Paul Helmig
Illinois Air National Guard

The response to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear (CBRN) threats in Illinois is an ongoing, multifaceted mission led by the 5th Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team (WMD CST).

When disaster strikes and local responders face catastrophic hazards, this highly specialized Illinois National Guard unit stands ready to answer the call, serving as a critical bridge between civilian authorities and military capabilities.

Established in 1998 as one of the original 10 civil support teams in the country, the Illinois-based 5th WMD CST serves a strictly non-combat, civil support mission. The unit is designed to be the first military responder at the scene of a CBRN incident.

Composed of 22 full-time National Guard personnel — 18 Soldiers and four Airmen — the 5th WMD CST operates primarily under the authority of the state governor. The unit deploys to domestic incidents involving the intentional or unintentional release of CBRN hazards, as well as natural and man-made disasters threatening severe loss of life or property.

Their response is built on four core pillars: identifying potential CBRN hazards, assessing consequences, advising civilian responders on appropriate actions and assisting with requests for additional support. By executing these functions, the team helps local incident commanders make life-saving decisions under immense pressure.

Due to the extreme technical demands of the mission, the team relies on a high ratio of senior military personnel divided into six specialized sections: command, operations, administration and logistics, communications, survey and medical and analytical.

When an incident occurs, an advance echelon initially arrives on scene to establish a staging area, conduct civilian liaison operations and perform initial threat assessments. Once the main body arrives, the full capabilities of the unit are brought to bear.





Lt. Col. Jeremy Boswell, commander of the 5th WMD CST, noted that the team acts as the backbone of the military's initial CBRN response. He said local incident commanders rely on the unit's ability to identify and assess unknown substances so they can safely commit their resources and make critical life-safety decisions.

"The Civil Support Team is the tip of the spear for the CBRN Response Enterprise," Boswell said. "It is a great honor to command this group of highly trained professionals."

The survey section serves as the unit's initial entry element. Wearing advanced personal protective equipment, the section deploys a reconnaissance team to conduct site surveys and monitor threat levels, and a sampling team to collect physical samples.

To ensure the safety of the personnel exiting the hot





zone, the unit utilizes its own members to conduct technical decontamination. Stepping out of their traditional administrative roles, the unit's training, human resources and logistics noncommissioned officers operate the decontamination line to ensure entry team members are safely cleared of hazards.

Once safely out of the hot zone, these samples are immediately processed by the medical and analytical section. Utilizing the Analytical Laboratory System, a mobile laboratory equipped with state-of-the-art technology like gas chromatographs and DNA identification capabilities, the team characterizes unknown substances on site. This rapid field analysis allows incident commanders to implement exact countermeasures without waiting days for off-site results.

Because local municipalities often lack this level of technical equipment, the 5th WMD CST fills a critical gap in emergency response. 1st Sgt. Jason Franks, first sergeant for the 5th WMD CST, noted that the team's joint Army and Air Force culture ensures they execute complex tasks efficiently. He expressed the utmost confidence that the unit will successfully fulfill the needs of its civilian counterparts during any incident.

"CBRN is not an additional duty for us; it's our core mission," Franks said. "We have the most knowledgeable, experienced and highly trained specialists on our team."

Beyond downrange survey missions, personnel provide secure connectivity through the communications section's Unified Command Suite, maintain supply lines through administration and logistics and track the overall mission via the operations section.

The 5th WMD CST frequently conducts Joint Hazard Assessment Team missions at large public events alongside partners like the FBI, Illinois State Police and local police and fire departments. Boswell added that the success of the mission relies heavily on building strong relationships with civilian emergency responders across local, state and federal agencies.

"Our close working relationship with these agencies has strengthened the state's response posture in the event of a CBRN-related incident," he said.

Though they are the lead military CBRN response unit in the state, leadership acknowledges it is a collective effort. Operating under the authority of the governor, the 5th WMD CST continues to bring federal military capabilities directly to the local level, ensuring Illinois remains ready to defend the home front.



Remembering Our Fallen

JULY

1st Lt. Derwin Williams



2009: 1st Lt. Derwin I. Williams, 41, of Glenwood, died July 6 in Konduz, Afghanistan of wounds sustained when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to Troop B, 2nd Battalion, 106th Cavalry based in Dixon.

Sgt. Chester Hosford



2009: Sgt. Chester W. Hosford, 35, of Ottawa, died July 6 in Konduz, Afghanistan of wounds sustained when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to Troop B, 2nd Battalion, 106th Cavalry based in Dixon.

Sgt. Christopher Talbert



2009: Sgt. Christopher M. Talbert, 24, of Galesburg, died July 7 in Shindad, Afghanistan of wounds sustained when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry based in Marion.

Sgt. Gerrick Smith



2009: Sgt. Gerrick D. Smith, 19, of Sullivan, died July 29 in Herat, Afghanistan, of injuries sustained from a non-combat related incident. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry, Illinois Army National Guard, Marion.

AUGUST

Spc. Brandon Ramsey



2003: Spc. Brandon Ramsey, 21, Calumet City, died Aug. 8 in a vehicle accident in Tallil, Iraq while performing convoy security operations in pursuit of a suspicious vehicle. He was assigned to the 933rd Military Police Company of Chicago.

SEPTEMBER

Spc. Charles Lamb



2004: Spc. Charles Lamb, 23, of Casey, died Sept. 5 in Baghdad, Iraq, during a mortar attack. Lamb was assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 1544th Transportation Company, Paris.

Sgt. Shawna Morrison



2004: Sgt. Shawna Morrison, 26, of Paris, died Sept. 5 in Baghdad, Iraq, during a mortar attack. Morrison was assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 1544th Transportation Company in Paris.

Sgt. Joshua Harris



2008: Sgt. Joshua W. Harris, 21, of Romeoville, died Sept. 17 in Gerdia Seria, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion 122nd Field Artillery in Robbins.

Staff Sgt. Jason Vazquez



2008: Staff Sgt. Jason A. Vazquez, 24, of Chicago, died Sept. 17 in Gerdia Seria, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when his vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion 122nd Field Artillery in Robbins.

Williams to VFW: The Work You Do Postively Impacts Service Members and Their Families

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, The Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, spoke to the delegates of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary at the organization's annual convention June 12 in Springfield.

"We have Soldiers serving all around the world and training across this nation," Williams said. "They are supporting operations around the world that you've seen on the news and they are training."

Williams thanked the members of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary for the work they do on behalf of service members and veterans.

"The work you do is positively impacting the lives of service members, veterans and their families," he said.



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, The Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, tells delegates to the Department of Illinois VFW State Convention the work veterans organizations do positively impacts service members and families.

Fonseca Thanks Legionnaires for Support

Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca, Director of the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff, spoke to members of the Department of Illinois American Legion during the organization's State Convention in Springfield July 10.

Fonseca thanked Legionnaires for their continued support of Illinois National Guard Soldiers, Airmen, veterans and military families while highlighting the Guard's ongoing missions at home and abroad.

He also emphasized the importance of the longstanding partnership between the Illinois National Guard and the American Legion in supporting those who serve.



Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca, Director of the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff, highlights the Illinois National Guard's ongoing missions at home and abroad to American Legion members. (U.S. Army photos by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay, Joint Force Headquarters – Illinois National Guard)

Undercover Colonel



126th Communications Flight

U.S. Air Force Col. Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing (ARW), commander, went undercover with Senior Airman Justin Cortes from the 126th Communications Flight, Base Equipment Control Office.

Cortes provided the Henschel with an orientation on IT asset accountability for the entire wing. They transferred several pieces of IT equipment ownership from one unit to another within the Enterprise Logistics Management System, validated some existing IT inventory, and pulled new IT equipment out of storage for immediate issuance to Airmen.

"Senior Airman Cortes and the BECO team do an amazing job managing all of our IT resources across the wing. They protect our assets and account for over $4 Million worth of equipment! I get the opportunity to learn something new every time I sit down with our incredible Airmen!" said Henschel.





U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Daehly Day, right, 126th Comptroller Flight, looks over the different entitlements due deployed Airmen with Col. Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing, commander, at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, July 30. Henschel spent part of the morning processing deployment entitlements with the CPTF. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)

126th Comptroller Flight

U.S. Air Force Colonel Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing, commander, went undercover with Senior Airman Daehly Day from the 126th Comptroller Flight to input several deployment entitlements.

Day had Henschel log into the WebDMO system to process three separate entitlements for six different Airmen who are currently deployed. They verified Airmen status and deployment details before processing their additional payments and tax exclusion status.

"Senior Airman Day and the finance team process thousands of transactions a month to ensure all our Airmen (including those who are deployed) receive correct payments and correct entitlements. Our finance team is incredibly talented, professional, and customer focused!" said Henschel.



U.S. Air Force Col. Matthew Kopp, center, 126th Air Refueling Wing, deputy commander, reads the instructions for the plank during the Air Force physical fitness test, to 2nd Lt. Austin Hays, 126th Force Support Squadron, at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, June 18. (Photos by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)

126th Force Support Squadron

U.S. Air Force Col. Matthew Kopp, deputy commander of the 126th Air Refueling Wing, went undercover in the 126th Force Support Squadron to assist Master Sgt. Linda Tessereau, 126th FSS, with administering the new physical fitness assessment. The Air Force Physical Fitness Program has a new assessment which incorporates new components and implements a culture of fitness.

"Our Force Support Personnel are essential in ensuring our airmen are ready to execute our global mission Anytime…Anywhere," said Kopp.



U.S. Air Force Col. Matthew Kopp, right, 126th Air Refueling Wing, deputy commander, marks down a successful shuttle completed for 2nd Lt. Austin Hays, 126th Force Support Squadron, as he runs the 20 meter High Aerobic Multi-Shuttle Run during the Air Force physical fitness test at Scott Air Force Base, June 18.



126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron

U.S. Air Force Col. Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing, commander, went undercover with Master Sgt. Cody Harpster, from the 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron to learn about crew chief duties. Harpster, the Lead Crew Chief on night shift, had Henschel recover an airplane from one of the daily training flights. He marshaled the airplane into parking, accomplished a post-flight inspection, checked and serviced the oil on all four engines, addressed an avionics write-up, and completed post-mission paperwork.

"Our total force Crew Chiefs do an awesome job recovering and launching airplanes every single day; rain or shine! They are one of the cornerstones that keeps our flying mission on time and on task." said Henschel.





U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Matthew Weghorst, center, a loadmaster chief enlisted manager with the 182nd Operations Support Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, speaks with former Staff Sgt. Charles Young, left, inside a C-130H Hercules aircraft at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Illinois, May 6.

Vietnam-era loadmaster experiences modern C-130 Hercules

Former U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Charles Young, center, speaks with Master Sgt. William Chapin, left, and Lt. Col. Randy Fasig, on the flight line at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Illinois, May 6. Young toured the wing to experience the current iteration of the C-130 Hercules. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)



A View from Above for 33rd MP Battalion Soldiers

Soldiers from the 33rd Military Police Battalion rode in a UH-60 Black Hawk during the culmination of their annual training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, Aug. 18.

The ride served as an opportunity for the Soldiers to inspect their shelters from an aerial perspective, giving them a better idea of how well concealed they were, and how to better conceal in the future.

The first flight was preceded by a symbolic reenlistment ceremony for Soldiers who had reenlisted within the last year. Lt. Col. Jacob Beard, the commander of the 33rd MP BN led the ceremony, reciting the oath of enlistment for Spc. Peter Catania, Sgt. Alexis Kelton, Sgt. Alyson Kennedy, Spc. Isabella Vargas, Sgt. Antonio Ruiz, Spc. Natanael Gamez, Staff Sgt. Ryan Wagner, Sgt. 1st Class Angel Perez and Sgt. Hector Gonzalez Olivares.



Lt. Col. Jacob Beard, Commander, 33rd Military Police Battalion, symbolically administers the oath of enlistment to nine battalion Soldiers who recently reenlisted in the Illinois National Guard.

Illinois Army National Guard 'Quiet Professionals' Celebrate 108th Birthday

Illinois Army National Guard Warrant Officers marked the 108th birthday of the U.S. Army Warrant Officer Cohort, July 9, celebrating more than a century of technical expertise and adaptive leadership that has strengthened America from World War I to modern multidomain operations.

As is tradition, Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, the Illinois National Guard Command Chief Warrant Officer, was joined by two of the youngest Warrant Officers in the ILARNG Cohort – Warrant Officer 1 Austin Mitchell and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Cody Talley as they ceremoniously cut the birthday cake.

Established in 1918, the Army Warrant Officer Corps has evolved from serving as masters, mates, chief engineers, and assistant engineers on mine-planting vessels to become the Army's premier technical experts across all domains of Army operations.

The Army defines warrant officers as self-aware and adaptive technical experts, combat leaders, trainers, and advisors who administer, manage, maintain, operate, and integrate Army systems and equipment across the full range of military operations.



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, the Illinois National Guard Command Chief Warrant Officer, joined by Warrant Officer 1 Austin Mitchell and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Cody Talley, ceremoniously cuts a cake marking the 108th anniversary of the Army Warrant Officer Corps.

Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School Graduates 22 Leaders

Twenty-two Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers graduated from the Illinois Army National Guard (ILARNG) Officer Candidate School (OCS) course through the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during a ceremony at Illinois State University's Capen Auditorium at Edwards Hall in Normal Aug. 16.

Eighteen Soldiers took the oath of office as newly-commissioned second lieutenants.

"Congratulations to OCS Class 71-26," said Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard. "Your graduation is an outstanding achievement. Less than one percent of our nation has served and only a fraction becomes officers. You represent that fraction."

Eastridge also thanked the Soldiers' family and friends as well as the OCS cadre.

"This course requires sacrifice," he said. "Thank you to everyone who played a role in getting you to this moment."

Eastridge, who graduated from the Illinois Army national Guard OCS in 2000, told the 18 new second lieutenants they are being entrusted to lead formations and train Soldiers.

"I sat where you are 26 years ago," he said. "I was ready to lead Soldiers. Thirteen months later, the terrorist attacks of September 11 happened. After September 11, our Army had to adapt quickly for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. One of those adaptations was the transformation to the Infantry Brigade Combat Team."

Eastridge said the Illinois Army National Guard adapted to that transformation.

"We built readiness through realistic, challenging training and developing our Soldiers and leaders," he said. "Today you are entering an Army undergoing another significant transformation. Operating environments are changing rapidly. Technology is changing how we fight. The Army transformation is accelerating how we adapt our formations, or equipment, our capabilities and that environment in how we win our nation's wars."

Eastridge shared a story about a conversation he had as a major with a Soldier. Ten years later, he saw the Soldier again and the Soldier shared how that conversation motivated him.

"As officers you will have that same opportunity to have conversations to influence Soldiers. Sometimes it will be deliberate," he said. "Sometimes it will be a 15-minute conversation you won't remember, but they will. Training matters, technology matters, equipment matters, but people win wars.

"Twenty-six years ago, I sat where you are. We



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Ashleigh Brown is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Dunbar is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.

don't know what will happen in the future," he said. "Develop ready Soldiers. Build ready formations. Be ready for whatever falls."

Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) congratulated the Soldiers on their accomplishment, but reminded them it is only the beginning.

"Today we celebrate not just what you accomplished, but what you are about to build," said Metzdorff. "This marks the powerful first step into the significant legacy you will create as an officer."

"You have conquered one of the most demanding and physical courses the U.S. Army offers," he said. "That speaks volumes about your dedication and your potential. Be proud of that accomplishment but understand it is merely the foundation."

Metzdorff told the Soldiers now the real construction begins.

"As you build your careers, let these principles be your blueprints," he said. "First, build your legacy on servitude. Your rank is not a mark of privilege. It is a symbol of your profound responsibility to the Soldiers you lead. The most enduring legacies are built by leaders who genuinely care for their people and their families. Make them your priority and they will become the bedrock of your success."

Metzdorff remindedthe OCS graduates, actions speak loudly to those they will lead.

"Build your legacy with your actions," he said. "Your character, both on and off duty,is the steel frame of your reputation. Lead by example in everything you do. Be the leader who is willing to do the hard work, who upholds the standard, and whose integrity is never in question. Your Soldiers will see this, and they will build their own standards on yours."

Metzdorff told the newly commissioned officers a legacy is never built alone. He said it is built with a team.

"You will soon be partnered with noncommissioned officers who possess a wealth of experience. Build your legacy by empowering them," he said. "Be the humble lieutenant who listens, learns, and trusts their platoon sergeant. A leader's true strength is measured by the strength of the teams they cultivate."

Metzdorffsaid the choices they make will shape the legacy they leave as officers.

"Build your legacy with confidence. Do not fear failure for the worst decision is always indecision," he said. "Trust your training, take calculated risks, and act with a decisiveness that your position demands.

"As you step forward remember this day not as the end of something, but as the launchpad for a legacy built on service, courage, and the unwavering commitment to those you lead," he said. "Go forth and write your legacy."

Class 71-26 is the 71st class to graduate from the 129th's Officer Candidate Program, which transforms enlisted noncommissioned officers and qualified civilians into U.S. Army officers. The future leaders complete more than 610 hours of classroom and field instruction, must meet the commissioning standards of the U.S. Army, and be examined, and approved by



Sgt. 1st Class Alex Evans is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Joseph Fisher is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.

a federal recognition board.

The newly commissioned second lieutenants, their branch, and unit of assignment are:

· 2nd Lt. Ashleigh Brown of York, Logistics, 1844th Transportation Company;

· 2nd Lt. Joseph Fisher of Worden, Engineer, 661st Engineer Company;

· 2nd Lt. Michael Foote of Wilmington, Military Police, Headquarters Support Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade;

· 2nd Lt. Jevorne Francisrichards of Kankakee, Logistics, 3625th Quartermaster Company;

· 2nd Lt. Tianyu Gai of Chicago, Aviation, unit to be determined;

· 2nd Lt. Timothy Gillmore of Lindenhurst, Chemical, 135th Chemical Company;

· 2nd Lt. Angelo Gonzalez of Chicago, Logistics, 725th Transportation Company;

· 2nd Lt. Miguel Gutierrez of Addison, Infantry, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment;

· 2nd Lt. Kyle Holgorsen of Davenport, Iowa, Logistics, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 44th Chemical Battalion;

· 2nd Lt. Eric Kim of Lockport, Chemical, 444th Chemical Company;

· 2nd Lt. Alexander Knoppe of Carbondale, Military Police, Headquarters and Headquarters



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Michael Foote is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Jevorne Francisrichards is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Tianyu Gai is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Timothy Gillmore is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.

Detachment, 33rd Military Police Battalion;

· 2nd Lt. Hoyt Lindsay of Herrin, Infantry, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment;

· 2nd Lt. Stephon McClain of Springfield, Engineer, 661st Engineer Company;

· 2nd Lt. Alexis Rodriguez of Plano, Signal, 406th Signal Company;

· 2nd Lt. Alexandra Still of Decatur, Logistics, Detachment 1, 1544th Transportation Company;

· 2nd Lt. Sean Wilhour of Crystal Lake, Infantry, Company D, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment;

· 2nd Lt. Christopher Williams of Chicago, Logistics, 725th Transportation Company; and

· 2nd Lt. Lawrence Woods of Sauk Village, Logistics, 126th Quartermaster Company

Four Soldiers chose to "hip-pocket" their commissions and seek federal recognition as Army officers at a later date. They are:

· Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Dunbar of Chicago;

· Sgt. 1st Class Alexander Evans of Springfield;

· Sgt. 1st Class Lauren Locandro of Mahomet; and

· Sgt. 1st Class Coire Reel of Sparta

Class 71-26 awards went to:

2nd Lt. Sean Wilhour of Crystal Lake was awarded the prestigious Maj. Gen. Edgar C. Erickson Trophy as the Distinguished Honor Graduate of Class 71-26. He demonstrated exceptional achievement across



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Angelo Gonzalez is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Miguel Gutierrez is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Kyle Holgorsen is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Eric Kim is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.

every evaluated domain. He was presented with an Army Achievement Medal.

2nd Lt. Eric Kim of Lockport was the 2nd Honor Graduate of the class. Kim earned recognition through consistent excellence in academics, leadership and physical fitness. He was presented with an Army Achievement Medal.

2nd Lt. Joseph Fisher of Worden was the 3rd Honor Graduate of the class for achieving high academic, leadership, peer evaluation and physical fitness scores. He was presented with an Army Achievement Medal.

Sgt. 1st Class Coire Reel of Sparta was awarded the Physical Fitness award for scoring 496 out of 500, a near perfect score, on the Army Fitness Test and setting record paces during tactical foot marches and the four-mile release run. He was presented with an Army Achievement Medal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Alex Knoppe is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Hoyt Lindsay is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Sgt. 1st Class Lauren Locandro is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Stephon McClain is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Sgt. 1st Class Coire Reel is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Alex Rodriguez is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Alexandra Still is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Sean Wilhour is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Chris Williams is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Lawrence Woods is presented with certificate of completion of the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School graduation and commissioning ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.





Above, U.S. Army Sgt. Alejandro Arellano, a UH-60 crew chief assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, performs maintenance on a UH-60V Blackhawk helicopter during Exercise Northern Strike 26-2 at Oscoda-Wurtsmith Airport, Oscoda, Michigan, Aug. 11, 2026. Right, U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Biagioni, a UH-60 crew chief assigned to Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, inspects the wheel of a UH-60V Blackhawk helicopter (U.S. Air National Guard photos by 1st Lt. Elise Wahlstrom)

Kreiter Inducted into OCS Hall of Fame

The 34th Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade's executive officer was inducted into the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School's Hall of Fame during a ceremony Aug. 16 at Illinois State University in Normal.

Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter enlisted as a Utility Supply Specialist in August 2003. He entered Officer Candidate School and received his commission in 2006 as a Signal Officer.

Throughout a career spanning twenty-three years, Kreiter has served in vital command and staff positions of increasing responsibility, including Retransmission Platoon Leader for the 33rd Signal Detachment; signal, communications, and information technology operations and operations, training and plans Air for Task Force White Eagle in Afghanistan; Operations Officer for the 108th Special Troops Battalion; Combat Service Support Automations Management Officer and Plans Officer for the 108th Sustainment Brigade; and Plans Officer for the 108th Special Troops Battalion at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait.

He went on to serve as the Commander of the 433rd Signal Company; signal, communications and information technology operations for the 108th Sustainment Brigade; Support Operations Forward Officer at Camp Taji, Iraq; Executive Officer for the 108th Special Troops Battalion; operations, training, and plans for the 65th Troop Command Brigade; Battalion Commander for the 1st Battalion, 129th Regiment, Regional Training Institute; and Battalion Commander for the 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade.

A proven combat leader, Kreiter has deployed four times in support of global operations. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2008 with the Polish Mentorship Team; to Kuwait in 2013 with the 108th Sustainment Brigade; to Iraq in 2018 with the 108th Sustainment Brigade as a Logistical Advisor to the Iraqi Military; and to Romania in 2023 as the Security Force Assistance Brigade Battalion Team Leader, advising Romania's 2nd Infantry Division.

His exemplary service is reflected in his extensive list of awards and decorations, which include: the Bronze Star Medal; two Meritorious Service Medals; the Army Commendation Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters; the Army Achievement Medal; the Afghanistan Campaign Medal; the NATO Medal; the Iraq Campaign Medal; the Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters; the National Defense Service Medal; the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal; the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal; the Army Service Ribbon; the Overseas Service Ribbon with numeral three; the Army Reserve Component Overseas Training Ribbon; and the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with Mobilization Device.



Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter is presented with the OCS Hall of Fame medallion by Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, during the OCS Hall of Fame Induction ceremony.



Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter is presented with the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame induction certificate from Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, right, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, and Col. Paul Metzdorff, Commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) during the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame induction ceremony Aug. 16 in Normal.



Service members pet therapy horses during the 126th Air Refueling Wing Mental Health Awareness Walk and Activity Fair at Scott Air Base, Illinois, June 6. The mental health awareness walk and activity fair was put together to hold an event, joining mental health organizations across Illinois and Missouri to educate military members and their families on the resources available to them. (U.S. Air National Guard Photo by Tech. Sgt. Vincent Lang)

126th Air Refueling Wing Hosts Mental Health Awareness Walk, Activity Fair



Service members receive information during a 126th Air Refueling wing Mental Health Awareness Walk and Activity Fair at Scott Air Base, Illinois, June 6. The mental health awareness walk and activity fair was put together to hold an event, joining mental health organizations across Illinois and Missouri to educate military members and their families on the resources available to them. (U.S. Air National Guard Photo by Tech. Sgt. Ari Freeman)

All in the Family

Rodgers Brothers Join Together, Retire Together from Illinois Air National Guard



U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Pat Burke, left, Commander, 108th Air Refueling Squadron, presents Lt. Col. Brad Rodgers, 108th Air Refueling Squadron, B Flight commander, with his retirement certificate at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, June 6. Rogers and his brother Lt. Col. Randy Rodgers, 126th Maintenance Group, deputy commander, on the same day in 1999 as crew chiefs on the KC-135 and participated in numerous stateside and overseas deployments. Lt Col. Randy Rodgers said, "It's only right we end the journey the way it started, together". (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Tech. Sgt. Ces White)



U.S. Air Force Col Tim Huchel, left, 126th Maintenance Group, commander, presents Lt. Col. Randy Rodgers, 126th Maintenance Group deputy commander, with his retirement certificate at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, June 6. Rogers and his brother Lt. Col. Brad Rodgers, 108th Air Refueling Squadron, B Flight commander, enlisted on the same day in 1999 as crew chiefs on the KC-135 and participated in numerous stateside and overseas deployments. Lt Col. Randy Rodgers said, "It's only right we end the journey the way it started, together". (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Tech. Sgt. Ces White)

Service members fellowship over coffee hosted by the 126th religious affairs services at Scott Air Base, Illinois, June 7.

The event, "Lattes with Landers", is a team-building event held to promote together-ness, morale and to show the support of religious affairs services. (U.S. Air National Guard Photo by Tech. Sgt. Ari Freeman)





U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Jimmie Jacobs, right, senior enlisted leader, 126th Mission Support Group, is presented with a Certificate of Retirement by Lt. Col Anthony Krueger, Commander, 126th Mission Support Group, at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois Aug. 8. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Vincent Lang)



U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Brent Smith, right, 108th Air Refueling Squadron pilot, poses with his wife Trisha, center, and U.S. Air Force Col. Nick Henschel, Commander, 126th Air Refueling Wing in celebration of his retirement after 25 years at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 8. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Ces White)



U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Chance Harpster, left, command chief, 126th Air Refueling Wing, greets U.S. Representative Mike Bost, at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 7. Bost was visiting to discuss future projects at the 126th ARW with Brig. Gen Kevin Jacobs, chief of staff, Illinois Air National Guard, Col. Nick Henschel, Commander, 126th ARW, and Elizabeth Roxworthy, chief of staff, Illinois Department of Military Affairs. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Beyonce' Williams)



U.S. Air Force Col. Nicolas Henschel, left, Commander, 126th Air Refueling Wing, passes the guidon to Col. Jeremy Reynolds, incoming commander, 126th Operations Group, at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 7. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Beyonce' Williams)

126th ARW Hosts Resiliency Retreat at Lake of Ozarks

126th Air Refueling Wing - Chapel Team hosted another successful resiliency retreat at the Margaritaville Resort, Lake of the Ozarks. Participants engaged in practical, relationship-building sessions centered on Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage, the well-known curriculum developed by Mark Gungor.

The retreat provided couples with a relaxed environment to reflect, reconnect, and strengthen communication skills. Attendees reported feeling encouraged and better equipped with tools to navigate everyday challenges together.

Organizers noted that the combination of a peaceful setting and meaningful programming made this year's retreat especially impactful, continuing a tradition of supporting strong, healthy relationships within the community.



Couples participating in the 126th Air Refueling Wing Chapel Team's resiliency retreat enjoyed a relaxed environment to reflect and reconnect.

Molina Assumes Command of 3637th



Lt. Col. Alex Dial, Commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion passes the 3637th Surface Maintenance Company guidon to 1st Lt. Ian Molina, the company's new commander.

Capt. Bryce Pool relinquished command of the 3637th Surface Maintenance Co. to 1st Lt. Ian Molina June 7, at the unit's headquarters on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

The presiding officer was Lt. Col. Alex Dial, Commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion.

Pool's last mission with the unit was taking 40 Soldiers to Germany to provide U.S. Army maintenance support during the Combined Resolve exercise from May 5-19.

Pool was awarded the Army Commendation Medal.

U.S. Army photo by
Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Airman Participates in First Cyber Shield

Story and photo by
Senior Airman Alexandria King
183rd Wing Public Affairs



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Tanner Rivera, Cyber Systems Operator with the 183rd Communications Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, conducts cyber defense training during the annual Cyber Shield training event held at the Professional Education Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, July 20.

Experiencing Cyber Shield for the first time, Staff Sgt. Tanner Rivera, Cyber System Operations, Communications Squadron, 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, dives into his role as an Intel Team Lead, working alongside members of the Air National Guard, Army National Guard, and international state partnership members at the Professional Education Center (PEC).

It can be difficult to imagine defending against an invisible attack. However, members at Cyber Shield take on the task, flexing their cyber defense capabilities against unseen enemies.

After being a cyber systems operator in the ANG for four years, Rivera remarks that his first Cyber Shield exercise allows him the opportunity to learn more about his field.

"I enjoy the challenge aspect that comes with cyber," Rivera said. "I like working through the challenges and figuring it out."

During this event, Rivera exercises different cyber defense strategies by ensuring that all members under his lead obtain any information necessary.

"Our job is to track and understand all the findings that go on at this operation," Rivera said. "We have to conduct briefings and conduct intelligence summaries, called INTSUMs, making sure everything is getting reported to the right channels. We navigate where things need to go and make sure people are where they need to be. We are also looking at prevention strategies. So everything that we're doing, we're trying to see the next step."

Cyber Shield is an annual cyber training event that exercises and develops cyber readiness, threat analysis, cyber defense, and joint collaboration across 44 states and territories and 23 countries. Through classroom training and hands-on application, members are able to collaborate on and strengthen their expertise in cyber operations on an international level.

As cyberattacks become an increasing threat due to technological advancements, Cyber Shield ensures that critical infrastructure is protected and safeguarded through joint training.

"We're trying to prevent any harm to our systems and trying to maintain their natural procedures…" Rivera said. "[We are] trying to get the bad guys out, essentially. There are people that are trying to take over our system, and our job is to stop them."

Although this is his first Cyber Shield exercise, Rivera embraces his role as an Intel Team Lead and strengthens cyber network defense by gathering and distributing information.

"It's my first time here, but it's not going to be my last one," Rivera said. "I definitely would like to go to [Cyber Shield] in the upcoming years."

He further highlights that all participating members have focused heavily on joining forces and working together to build a stronger cyber defense team. For future Cyber Shield exercises, Rivera encourages all military members to participate, whether new or experienced.

By working with military members across the nation and around the world, Rivera bolsters cyber warfighting capabilities.



From left, Malaysian army Lans Korperal Muhammad Aiman Al-Akhtar Bin Mohd Rizuan, Lans Korperal Muhammad Faizul Naim Bin Hazman, Lans Korperal Muhammad Izham Shazrul Bin Mohd Idrus, and Sarjan Kenny Debaptist, all assigned to Company B, 1st Medical Battalion, Royal Medical Corps, 5th Infantry Division, stand in formation alongside U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Howard Mosley III, a treatment and evacuation platoon leader with the 709th Medical Company Area Support, Illinois Army National Guard, as they await to be recognized during a joint promotion ceremony near Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, July 20. Held during Exercise Keris Strike 26, the ceremony recognized the advancement of all five Soldiers while celebrating bilateral partnership and shared professional milestones in the Indo-Pacific. (U.S. Army photos by Sgt. 1st Class John L. Carkeet IV, 204th Public Affairs Detachment)



Malaysian army Mejar Dr. Mohd Afham Abdul Kadir, commander of Company B, 1st Medical Battalion, Royal Medical Corps, pins new rank insignia onto Lans Korperal Muhammad Izham Shazrul Bin Mohd Idrus during a joint promotion ceremony near Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, July 20.



U.S. Army Maj. Jacob Ambrose, commander, 709th Medical Company Area Support, Illinois Army National Guard places a boonie hat featuring the new rank insignia on 1st Lt. Howard Mosley III, a treatment and evacuation platoon leader assigned to the 709th MCAS during a joint promotion ceremony near Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, July 20.

Illinois National Guard Promotes Two Soldiers to Colonel During Same Ceremony

Story and photos by
Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, performed a rare ceremony promoting both Col. Matthew D. Brady, the Construction and Facilities Management Officer (CFMO) for the Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters, and Col. Jesse N. Wright, the Director of Operations for the Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters, at the same time at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield July 11.

"There's 10,000 Soldiers in this organization, spread across the state, currently spread across this world," Williams said. "There's 19 of the rank that they're about to make."

He went on to state that being a colonel is special because while enlisted Soldiers, especially the NCOs, are the ones who make the Army go, even lieutenant colonels, unless in command, are still doers of things.

"When you become colonel, you're not necessarily a doer of things anymore," said Williams. "If you want to earn the respect and trust of those you lead, you should be able to do the things you ask of them. And these two gentleman, I've watched them do that their entire career. They've lived that."

Brady enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2003 with the 135th Engineer Company in Lawrenceville. He received his commission as a second lieutenant



Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth, second from right, Illinois Army National Guard (ILARNG) Deputy Military Personnel Officer, shows the coin which will determine the order of pinning to colonel to Lt. Col. Matthew Brady, second from left, the ILARNG's construction and facilities management officer, Lt. Col. Jesse Wright (right), the ILARNG Director of Operations, and Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander, Illinois Army National Guard, during the double promotion ceremony to colonel at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield July 11.



At right, Katherine Brady watches while her sister Eileen Brady removes the rank of their father Col. Matthew Brady, the Illinois Army National Guard's construction and facilities management officer, during a double promotion ceremony to colonel July 11 in Springfield.



Julie Wright, wife of newly promoted Col. Jesse Wright, the Illinois National Guard's Director of Operations, pins on his new rank during the double promotion ceremony to colonel July 11 in Springfield.

in 2005, after completing Officer Candidate School with the Alabama Military Academy at Fort McClellan, Alabama. Brady completed Engineer branch qualification and returned to Lawrenceville, where he served as platoon leader and executive officer before deploying to Afghanistan in 2008 with the 766th Explosive Hazards Coordination Cell, 766th Engineer Battalion, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), Illinois Army National Guard.

After the deployment, he returned to Lawrenceville to take command of the 631st Engineer Support Company, 123rd Engineer Battalion, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB), Illinois Army National Guard, from 2009 to 2011. Post command, Brady moved to the 404th MEB, Illinois Army National Guard, where he completed his Chemical branch qualification and served as both the Engineer and Chemical branch officer in alternating years. In 2016, Brady was assigned to the 44th Chemical Battalion, 404th MEB, Illinois Army National Guard, where he was the S3 and executive officer, before serving as Battalion Commander from 2019 to 2022.

Post battalion command, he deployed with the 404th MEB to Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa. After the deployment, he served as the Facilities/Contract Construction Management Engineer for the 1886th Engineer Facility Detachment. He returned to 404th MEB to serve as the brigade S3 from 2023-2025. Brady was then assigned to Joint Forces Headquarters and served as the J1 in 2025. His current assignment, as the Construction and Facilities Management Officer (CFMO) Illinois Army National Guard, began in May 2026.

"This assignment, the Chief Facilities Management Officer, is the job I always wanted," said Brady. "When I enlisted, it was with this job in mind; it just took me 20 years to get here. I look forward to the challenges ahead and working with the great professionals across the state in the days, months, and years to come."

Wright enlisted in the United States Army Reserve in 1994. He subsequently entered regular Army in 1996, serving as a Field Artilleryman with the 1st Battalion, 14th Field Artillery Regiment. After completing his active-duty service, he transitioned to the Illinois Army National Guard, where he served with the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment and reclassified as an Infantryman. In 2003, he was commissioned through the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) as an ordnance officer.

His previous assignments include Plans and Policy Officer (J35) Joint Force Headquarters, Deputy Commander, 404th MEB; Operations Officer (S3), 404th MEB; Battalion Commander 33rd Military Police Battalion, Antiterrorism/ Force Protection Officer 404th MEB, S1 129th RTI (Regional Training Institute), Technical Operations Branch Chief, Joint Force Headquarters; Operations Officer for Bilateral Embedded Staff Team (BEST) A11; Commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 33rd IBCT; Assistant Operations Officer (S3), 33rd IBCT; Commander, Forward Support Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division; Battalion Logistics Officer (S4), 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division; and Battalion Maintenance Officer, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division.

Wright deployed twice to Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2005 to 2006 and 2007 to 2008. In 2013, he deployed to Afghanistan with the Illinois Army National Guard as a member of Bilateral Embedded Staff Team (BEST) A11 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"The eagle on my chest isn't a measure of where I've been," said Wright. "It's a reminder of what is expected of me going forward. Promotion to colonel isn't the end of a journey. It's the beginning of an even bigger responsibility. I look forward to continuing to serve, developing future leaders, and earning that trust every day."

Brady was pinned by his daughters Eileen Brady and Katherine Brady. Wright was pinned by his wife, Julie.

Air National Guard Airmen sharpen tactical storytelling at 'The Strategic Lens' workshop

Story and photos by
Senior Master Sgt. Scott Thompson
182nd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

Eighteen public affairs Airmen representing six states and territories gathered at the 125th Fighter Wing to participate in "The Strategic Lens," an intensive military storytelling workshop held June 23-26, 2026.

The four-day training event brought together Airmen from Florida, Puerto Rico, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Illinois. The curriculum focused on elevating traditional military public affairs coverage into compelling, human-centric narratives, blending advanced visual sequencing with high-impact strategy to sharpen readiness in a complex global information environment.

The regional workshop was established at the initiative of the 125th FW, which served as the requesting entity for the specialized training. Recognizing an opportunity to supplement standard career field education with focused, advanced skills, the 125th FW public affairs office, through the initiative of U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Marissa Welker, organized the event and undertook the majority of the logistics to make the workshop a reality. The host wing's public affairs team managed the logistical footprint and coordinated specific field assignments for the incoming instructor team, transforming the concept into a premier southeastern regional public affairs workshop.

The design of the training reflects a growing demand across the Air National Guard public affairs community for immersive, interactive learning environments over traditional computer-based or virtual training platforms. Recognizing that theoretical slides cannot replicate the complexity of operational environments, field-level storytellers sought out a forum centered on deliberate, face-to-face mentorship and real-time networking. This grassroots effort resulted in a practical field workshop open to anyone looking to hone their craft alongside like-minded professionals.

The collaboration behind "The Strategic Lens" represents a continuous effort by the instructor team to fulfill these critical training opportunities across the career field. U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Scott Thompson, superintendent for the 182nd Airlift Wing, and U.S. Air Force Capt. Jonathan Padish, the public affairs section chief for the 183rd Air Component Operations Squadron, both of the Illinois Air National Guard, worked hand in hand with the 125th FW on the initial request for the workshop. As the primary instructors and curriculum designers, both Padish and Thompson have partnered over the years on a variety of



U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Scott Thompson, the public affairs superintendent for the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, speaks with a public affairs workshop participant at Jacksonville Air National Guard Base, Florida, June 26.



U.S. Air Force Capt. Jonathan Padish, the public affairs section chief for the 183rd Air Component Operations Squadron, mentors Tech. Sgt. Cesar Cordero, public affairs specialist for the 125th Fighter Wing, Florida Air National Guard, on an assignment during a 4-day public affairs storytelling workshop at the 125th Fighter Wing in Jacksonville, Florida, Jun. 26.

workshops and training exercises to promote skill set advancement and level up capabilities across the career field. By channeling their decades of combined civilian and military experience back into the National Guard communications community, they continue to mentor younger generations and fulfill the clear need for active field training.

Because public affairs skills are highly perishable, a lack of consistent training often leads to a decline in operational proficiency. To counter this, the workshop was intentionally structured around intimate, small-class instruction immediately followed by hands-on application to cement those skills in real time.

To build sustainable proficiency, the curriculum utilized a scaffolded training model. Airmen had to navigate three distinct practical assignments. The first two served as technical building blocks, directly feeding into a comprehensive third assignment that demanded a significantly higher expectation of narrative depth and production quality.

The emphasis throughout the week was on moving out of the classroom and pushing advanced capabilities into the field under operational constraints. While classroom instruction provides the framework, the training stressed that real learning happens in the field where variables are constantly shifting. Instructors emphasized the need for students to maximize their hands-on time, equating repetition with the vital "trigger time" required to achieve greater accuracy.

Padish underscored the broader operational intent of the course layout.

"One goal of this training is to review communication planning concepts at the operational or strategic level then apply those concepts to actual tactical-level execution," Padish said. "For public affairs, that means being strategic with multimedia products."

Padish noted that the unique environment of the reserve component makes dedicated field iterations like this critical for long-term readiness.

"In the Guard, we go on duty and perform," Padish explained. "When drill weekend or orders end, it's easy to brain dump our public affairs skills, especially if strategic communications isn't our day job. So, one thing I stress to everyone is to not let perishable public affairs skills sit idle."

Operating out of the 125th FW provided a high-tempo backdrop for the training. Airmen tested their skills against an active flight line, capturing the complex, fast-paced operations of aerospace defense while also telling stories across the entire support base as individual storytellers. Each field assignment was followed by direct post-production mentorship and critique to help participants evaluate their unique visual perspective and technical execution.

For the participants, the combination of real-world constraints and focused intent forced a shift in perspective.

"Coming to the Strategic Lens training, I had the goal of changing how I showed up to assignments," said U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Alexis Goodman, a public affairs specialist with the 169th Fighter Wing, South Carolina Air National Guard. "Traditionally, I show up, get whatever content and action I can, edit it, and then turn it in. The overarching message and theme, however, was missing within the products themselves and filled in with captions."

Goodman noted that the hands-on environment enabled the technical concepts to click in

ways that static lectures could not replicate.

"This training taught me how to prepare and really think about command intent and how to create content centered on that intent," Goodman said. "I'm thankful for this hands-on training. It gave me the chance to take what I learned in the classroom and apply it to real scenarios, effectively rewiring my brain to start seeing the whole story."

Beyond individual skill refinement, the workshop emphasized lateral communication and resource sharing between separate wings to maximize the training's operational impact across the broader National Guard enterprise.

"Workshops like this offer incredible value to public affairs professionals by providing unique opportunities to sharpen visual storytelling skills and further develop new tactics, techniques and share best practices with participants from sister units," said U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Rafael D. Rosa, public affairs superintendent with the 156th Wing, Puerto Rico Air National Guard. "Bringing these lessons back to my wing helps my team and me better communicate our mission, build stronger partnerships and deliver more effective public affairs capabilities."

Following the conclusion of the workshop, the 18 Airmen returned to their respective home stations across the country, carrying back refined skillsets, fresh creative perspectives and a strengthened lateral network of peers ready to document and communicate the Air National Guard's mission anytime, anywhere.





The Illinois Army National Guard held its Company and Battalion pre-Command Course on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. The course educates new company and battalion command teams on their responsibilities and gives them the opportunity to ask questions of Illinois Army National Guard senior leaders. The course included remarks from Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General - Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, as well as a panel with multiple ILARNG directorates. (U.S. Army photos by Maj. A.J. Peskuski, Commander of the 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment.)

Illinois Air National Guard Partners with Missouri Baptist for Trauma Training

Airmen from the 126th Medical Group are participating in a new training partnership program, with Missouri Baptist Medical Center, a BJC HealthCare facility.

Air Force Aerospace Medicine Technicians are required to meet a training objective of 40 hours of clinical experience in an acute emergency or critical care setting, every two years to strengthen their clinical readiness in emergency care. For the technicians to complete their 40 hours. These hours are typically completed through Annual Training , Deployment for Trainings, and in this case, a Training Affiliation Agreement.

In summer 2024, U.S. Air Force Col. Troy Compardo, 126th Medical Group, commander, and a former BJC employee, played a key role in launching this partnership. Working alongside Ms. Patricia Reda, Missouri Baptist Medical Center chief nursing officer, and the 126th Judge Advocate General's office, established a TAA, a formal and legal agreement that allows member 126th MDG personnel to gain hands-on experience in MBMC's Emergency Department under outlined legal and training conditions.

"Having a hospital like MBMC that is willing and eager to establish a partnership with the 126th MDG has not only proven to be paramount for our medics to receive high-level training, but also establishes a foundation for further collaboration," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Scotty Duranceau, nursing services officer in charge of the 126th MDG. "The whole experience has been amazing."

The program gives military medical personnel the opportunity to perform a variety of emergency care tasks including phlebotomy, vital sign monitoring and reporting, emergency first-aid, 12-lead EKG setup and monitoring, respiratory interventions, wound care, and glucose monitoring, as well as supporting emergency interventions when needed.

Tech. Sgt. Erica Jacobs, 126th MDG, aerospace medicine technician, recently finished her rotation in the 126th MDG – MBMC program.

"I had a lot of learning experiences in the ER with hands-on skills," said Jacobs. "I also got to stand in on a code blue and was designated as a back-up for chest compressions."

When deployed, mass casualty events. In such events, military medics and technicians must be capable to triage, making quick decisions and provide care in a rapid paced environment with limited resources.

"Our medical facility resembles a family medicine clinic, and we don't have an emergency department," said Jacobs. "But in the ER, there's obviously a greater sense of urgency, so not only are we able to perform our skills, but we perform them urgently. When deployed, we are going to be expected to be confident in our skill set and perform it quickly."

Training alongside seasoned civilian nurses in urgent settings provides the unit's medical personnel with insight on how to handle stressful environments in a safe and calm manner, better preparing them for real-world deployments.

"The staff worked together so well," said Jacobs. "All the nurses were nice and welcomed us with their willingness to train.

Civilian nurses in MBMC's emergency department can provide medical personnel with exposure to unpredictable conditions and fast-paced environments that closely mirror real-life combat casualty care.

"Training in the ER has helped me to understand the need for acute care training because we are exposed to patients in critical condition and gaining hands-on experience caring for patients with acute issues," said Staff. Sgt. Shaylyn Mayberry, 126th Aerospace Medicine Technician and current participant in the 126th MDG – MBMC program. "This would be beneficial for a deployment because we will have an overall better understanding of emergency medicine as aerospace medical technicians."

"This collaboration gives military personnel the opportunity to gain real world clinical experience in an emergency care setting at the same time our staff benefits from the chance to engage with and learn from the unique operational perspective." said Ms. Shannon Beirne, MBMC Emergency Department nurse manager. "Their presence strengthens our clinical teams and brings a unique field of medicine, this partnership reflects our commitment to innovation, collaboration, and serving our community with excellence."

The goal of the 126th MDG – MBMC program is to enhance the ability to respond effectively to a higher level of care and trauma in acute care settings worldwide. By partnering with the high volumes of civilian emergency departments like MBMC, the program helps medical technicians develop essential teamwork and trauma care skills, better preparing them for real-world deployments.



Col. Shawn Strahle, Commander of the 183rd Wing, talks about the preparation required of student-athletes and the training Airmen undergo to carry out real-world missions with the University of Illinois Springfield men's soccer team during the team's visit to the 183rd Wing in Springfield.

UIS Men's Soccer Team Learns Leadership, Team Bonding from 183rd Wing Airmen

Story by
Staff Sgt. Kevin Pendergrass
183rd Wing Public Affairs

Members of the University of Illinois Springfield men's soccer team visited the 183rd Wing to learn about leadership, teamwork and performing under pressure.

During the visit, the student-athletes met with Airmen and visited the 183rd Air Operations Group, 183rd Civil Engineer Squadron and 183rd Maintenance Squadron. The team also heard from Col. Shawn Strahle, 183rd Wing commander, and Lt. Col. Jon Bormann, a 183rd Wing chaplain and UIS alumnus.

"Anything we can do in terms of leadership and team bonding that shows us how leadership is done at the top end in pressure situations can relate to us when we have difficult moments in our season," said Graham Shaw, UIS men's soccer coach. "We can look back at this exercise and remember what happens in stressful situations, focus on the practices and training we've done, and hopefully stick together as a team."

Strahle drew parallels between the preparation required of student-athletes and the training Airmen undergo to carry out real-world missions.

"We have exercises. That's our practice, basically. And our game days are when we deploy, or we go on state active duty for a flood or tornado or cyber operations," Strahle said. "What's our mission intent? What are our objectives? It's the same thing that will apply for the rest of your life."

Strahle also emphasized the value of working with people from different backgrounds toward a shared objective.

"Working and getting along with people that you may not normally get along with, but you have to because you're after a common goal, are skills that you're going to have both when you go into a civilian career, if you enter the military or anything else," Strahle said.

Bormann built on those themes by discussing followership and the responsibility each individual has in shaping a team's culture.

"A great follower is not a passenger. They are a driver of organizational and team culture," Bormann said. "If we're going to affect change, if we're going to make a difference in this world, on a team and in an organization, the culture of that place is our responsibility."

Bormann encouraged the players to understand their individual roles, uphold team standards and remain consistent through adversity, reinforcing how leadership and followership can contribute to success both on and off the field.



183rd Wing Hosts Emerging Leader Workshop

The 183rd Wing held an Emerging Leader Workshop aimed at preparing noncommissioned officers (NCO) for expanded leadership roles across the organization.

Chief Master Sgt. Nathaniel Bostic led the workshop, which brought together NCOs for training and discussions on leadership development, resilience and professional growth.

The event included a speed-mentoring session with senior noncommissioned officers, giving airmen an opportunity to seek guidance from experienced leaders. Bostic also led a session on emotional intelligence, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, communication and relationship-building in leadership.

Additional sessions included a first sergeant's perspective on leadership and resiliency training designed to help NCOs manage challenges and support their teams.

The workshop was intended to strengthen the 183rd Wing's NCO Corps by equipping participants with practical leadership tools and perspectives they can apply within their units.



182nd Airlift Wing Flight Superintendent Retires After 40 Years of Service

U.S. Air Force Capt. Brock Lemmon, left, the commander of the 182nd Maintenance Operations Flight, Illinois Air National Guard, presents a Legion of Merit certificate to Chief Master Sgt. Peter Schussler, the superintendent with the flight, during his retirement ceremony in Peoria, Illinois, Aug. 1. Schussler retired after 40 years of military service. (Illinois Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)





Sikorski Assumes Command of 182nd Communications Squadron

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Anthony Mini, commander of the 182nd Communications Squadron, relinquishes command to Col. Bridget S. Zorn, commander of the 182nd Mission Support Group, as Maj. Jason Sikorski receives command of the 182nd Communications Squadron at 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Illinois, June 5, 2026. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Scott Thompson)



An Illinois Army National Guard color guard presented our nation's colors during the opening ceremonies of the Barack Obama Presidential Center, June 18, on the South Side of Chicago. After the ceremony, the Soldiers from the Chicago-based 34th Division Sustainment Brigade met former Commander in Chief Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.



Alvarez Performs National Anthem at Illinois State Fair in Springfield

Staff Sgt. Gabby Alvarez, an intelligence analyst assigned to the 34th Sustainment Brigade, Illinois Army National Guard, performed the national anthem Aug. 22, 2026 at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield. Alvarez's performance helped kick off the day's racing events and showcased the Illinois National Guard's connection to the communities we serve across the state. (U.S. Army photos by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche, Joint Force Headquarters – Illinois National Guard)



Grindel Assumes Command of 182nd Force Support Squadron

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jason Grindel, the commander of the 182nd Force Support Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, recreates an assumption of command ceremony photo in Peoria, Illinois, July 31, 2026. The billet is Grindel's first command after serving diverse roles as a missions conversion officer, wing executive officer and judge advocate. (Illinois Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)

Grit, Courage and Resilience Define Illinois Army National Guard Combatives Champions

The top finishers in the Illinois Army National Guard's 2026 TAG Modern Army Combatives Championship, Aug. 21-23, included a tattoo artist, the owner and operator of a high-rise window cleaning business, a high school wrestling coach, a couple of nursing students, a homeless shelter employee studying to be an accountant, a traveling millwright, a business consultant, and an expert in heating, cooling, and electrical repair.

"It was great to see Soldiers step onto the mats and put their personal courage to the test," said Staff Sgt. Jonathan Ulin, the Illinois Army National Guard Combatives Noncommissioned Officer-in-Charge. "Moving forward, our goal is to continue growing the Combatives Program across the Illinois Army National Guard, bring more attention to the program at the (129th Regional Training Institute), and build this tournament into something bigger each year. If we can continue to grow the program and get more Soldiers involved, I think that's a good sign that we're moving our fighting force in the right direction."

"What other discipline can you make people bleed and then be friends right afterward," said Capt. Jonavan Huggins, the full-time personnel officer for the 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery and the wrestling coach at Chicago Hope Academy. "I'm going to bring this training back to the unit as much as possible."

The weekend began with the Instructors Summitt, Aug. 21, on Camp Lincoln followed by the tournament from Aug. 22-23 at American Jujitsu in Springfield. Huggins said that readiness in



Spc. Saquan Bufford (with the red belt) fights Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Beal in the lightweight championship. Bufford, a Soldier in the Chicago-based 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery, is a tattoo artist with Ink My Image in Chicago. Beal is a Soldier in the 634th Brigade Support Battalion, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, but works full-time as a supply NCO for the Peoria-based 65th Troop Command Brigade. Bufford defeated Beal in the Aug. 23 lightweight title bout during the Illinois Army National Guard's TAG Combatives Tournament at American Jujitsu in Springfield.

Modern Army Combatives took a dip with the COVID-19 pandemic and he praised the program's staff at the Springfield-based 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) for their efforts to bring these vital Soldier skills back.

Combatives, akin to mixed martial arts, teach Soldiers how to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat and emerge victorious. In addition to being an important Soldier skill, it also teaches important life skills such as discipline, physical readiness, and resilience, said Huggins, who wrestled at Wheaton College under coach Jim Gruenwald, a two-time Olympian with the U.S. Olympic Greco Roman wrestling team.

Huggins has wrestled worldwide through Fellowship of Christian Athletes, is active in Athletes in Action, and helps mentor Chicago youth in wrestling through Beat the Streets National.

Despite these credentials, 1st Lt. Jordan Ramirez of Springfield – a business consultant with Deloitte and an Infantry officer with the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment – gave Huggins a fight before the captain and



Spc. Saquan Bufford (with the red belt) fights Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Beal in the lightweight championship. Bufford, a Soldier in the Chicago-based 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery, is a tattoo artist with Ink My Image in Chicago. Beal is a Soldier in the 634th Brigade Support Battalion, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, but works full-time as a supply NCO for the Peoria-based 65th Troop Command Brigade.

former collegiate wrestler won by decision in the light heavyweight championship bout. "I just like doing something different in the military than what I do in the civilian world," Ramirez said. "Infantry and Combatives are a little different than being a business consultant."

Spc. Bryan Madinger of Marion, a nursing student at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville and Soldier in the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, said he can see a relationship between his involvement in Combatives and his aspiration to become a certified nurse. "You gotta break'em before you can fix'em," he quipped.

Madinger did beat, but did not break, Sgt. Aaron Rivera of the Chicago-based 34th Division Support Battalion in the ultra heavyweight championship bout. Rivera owns and operates DTL Window Washing and Exterior Cleaning, a high-rise window washing company in Chicago. "I tell my friends in the Army National Guard that I get to rappel every day," Rivera said.

Sgt. Adetunji Jones, representing the Decatur-based 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion, might be described as a combatives beast. Although there is no formal recognition for the speed of one's attack, Jones did take just over 30 seconds to defeat one of his opponents during Saturday's preliminary rounds. Off the mat, he works for Home Sweet Home Ministries homeless shelter in Bloomington, where he helps provide "Hope for All Who Enter." He is also working on his accounting degree at Illinois State University.

On the mat, it took Jones about eight minutes to defeat Sgt. Landon Walker of the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Battalion in the cruiserweight championship. Walker also works in Bloomington, but as an HVAC and Electrical expert for Masters Bros, a family-owned electrical, plumbing, construction, maintenance, heating and cooling services company.

Spc. Saquan Bufford of the Chicago-based 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery is a tattoo artist with Ink My Image in Chicago. He defeated Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Beal in the lightweight championship. Beal is a Soldier



Capt. Jonavan Huggins (top), the full-time personnel officer for the 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery and the wrestling coach at Chicago Hope Academy, fights 1st Lt. Jordan Ramirez of Springfield – a business consultant with Deloitte and an Infantry officer with the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, in the light heavyweight championship Aug. 23 title bout during the Illinois Army National Guard's TAG Combatives Tournament at American Jujitsu in Springfield.

in the 634th Brigade Support Battalion, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, but works full-time as a supply NCO for the Peoria-based 65th Troop Command Brigade.

In the middleweight championship, Spc. William Eyre of the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry defeated Spc. Manuel Cano of the 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment in the title bout. Eyre, an amateur boxer and a nursing student at John A. Logan Community College, said that the combatives tournament was good training for two upcoming boxing matches, next weekend in St. Louis and another two weeks from now in Springfield, Missouri. Members of the Eyre Family have served in the U.S. Armed Forces for about two centuries, he said.

Cano is studying finance at Sauk Valley Community College, owns and operates his own dump trailer business, and assists his parents with the operation of El Vaquero Food Market in Sterling.

Sgt. Laine Czaikowski of the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment won the heavyweight title by medical forfeit. Czaikowski is a traveling millwright for The Kelly Group based in Decatur. He travels throughout the country doing precision industrial mechanic work. After the tournament he hit the road for New Orleans, La., for a job in the Big Easy.

"It was a lot of fun," Czaikowski said of his first time competing in the tournament. While he's dabbled in Muay Thai and Brazilian Jujitsu over the past year or so, he said his main training was "growing up with three brothers."

"Competition is always good," he added. "You never really know what you're capable of until you dive in headfirst. You might find a new passion."

His would-be opponent, Sgt. 1st Class Logan Weir of the 634th Brigade Support Battalion, had to bow out of the competition after Saturday's preliminary rounds. Weir, a former high school wrestling coach, aggrevated a bicep injury he suffered while training young wrestlers in the Warren County Thunder, a youth wrestling group he established five or six years ago. Weir also co-manages the mixed martial arts Take the Fight Academy in Galesburg with a friend and former MMA fighter.

Weir, who has participated in the ILARNG Combatives Tournament for several years, said participants can expect to be sore and will have some bumps and bruises from the tournament, but serious injuries are rare. "It is extremely valuable training," Weir said. "I'd encourage anyone to give it a try. There is a slightly higher risk factor (than typical Army training), but it's such a great thing."

Weir said he's met some of his best friends in the military through the Combatives Tournament. "We've beaten the crap out of each on the mat, and then there's great comradery off the mat."

McClain Retires from Illinois Army National Guard after 25 Years of Service

By 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Family, friends, fellow Soldiers and leaders gathered July 31 at the Illinois Military Academy auditorium to honor Maj. Tarah McClain as she retired from the Illinois Army National Guard following more than 25 years of military service.

McClain enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2001 and rose to the rank of staff sergeant before earning her commission through Officer Candidate School in 2013. Throughout her career, she served in a variety of leadership and staff assignments while remaining committed to developing Soldiers and strengthening the organization.

Her career included a combat deployment to Iraq in 2004 with the 1644th Transportation Company, where she transported equipment and supplies throughout Iraq and Kuwait. As an officer, she served in positions including Human Resources Office Training Officer, Personnel Officer, Administrative Officer, Joint Staff Operations Officer, commander of Company C. of the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion, aide-de-camp to the Adjutant General of Illinois, and most recently executive officer for the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, overseeing headquarters operations in training, operations, administration, logistics and informational technology.

During the ceremony, Lt. Col. Lance Frail, commander of the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, reflected on McClain's leadership and the lasting impact she had on those around her.



Lt. Col. Lance Frail, Commander, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, presents Maj. Tarah McClain with an honorable discharge during a retirement ceremony honoring McClain's 25 years of military service.

Frail described McClain as a supportive, caring and accountable leader who balanced mission accomplishment with genuine concern for Soldiers. He said she consistently mentored her teammates, used challenges as teaching opportunities and invested in developing others to ensure both individuals and the organization succeeded. He thanked her for her dedication and told her that the Recruiting and Retention Battalion and the Illinois Army National Guard would miss her.

In her retirement remarks, McClain called out several individuals, giving them a heartfelt thanks, and emphasizing that none of her accomplishments were achieved alone. "It is an honor to stand before you today as I reflect on over 25 years of service in the Army National Guard," McClain said. "This journey has been one of growth, challenge and profound fulfillment."

She expressed gratitude to her husband, children, extended family, mentors and fellow Soldiers for supporting her throughout deployments, long hours, and the demands of military service.

Rather than offering advice at the conclusion of her career, McClain chose to focus on the values that shaped it.

"I really wanted to relay to you my deep appreciation of family, people and service," she said, thanking the leaders, peers, subordinates and civilians she served alongside while pledging to continue caring for people and representing the Illinois Army National Guard honorably in retirement.



The Illinois Army National Guard's 144th Army Band joined the farming community of Beecher, Illinois, in celebrating the nation's 250th birthday, July 4.

Illinois Army National Guard's 144th Army Band Gets Downpour of Support from Beecher

The farming community of Beecher, Illinois, doubles, even triples, in size every July 4 drawing people from throughout the region to celebrate our Nation's Independence in this slice of Americana on the prairie.

The 250th Birthday of America was no different, except the rain, a lot of rain.

But there was the Illinois Army National Guard's 144th Army Band marching and playing Patriotic music through the downpour.

The band played on - and sounded great - as about an inch of rain and high winds descended upon the community. The crowds of spectators huddled under tents as children played in puddles - well attired in bathing suits. They all cheered as the band and an Army National Guard truck from the 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment weaved its way through the neighborhoods of Beecher, a community that refused to allow a little rain, well, A LOT of rain, spoil America's 250th Birthday Party.



A truck from 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artilley Regiment weaves its way through the streets of Beecher, Illinois, during the community's July 4 parade.



144th Army Band Celebrates America's 250th Birthday with Concert in Sandwich Opera House

The Illinois Army National Guard's 144th Army Band played at multiple community events throughout America's 250th birthday weekend including a performance at the Sandwich, Illinois, Opera House on July 5.

During the last part of the band's last concert, the band invited friends, family, and retirees to perform with them.









Active Shooter Drill Tests 182nd Airlift Wing Airmen's Readiness, Response Capabilities

Over August drill, members of the 182nd Airlift Wing participated in an active shooter exercise designed to test our readiness and response capabilities in a simulated emergency situation.

Exercises like this give Airmen the opportunity to practice critical procedures, strengthen coordination and identify areas where we can improve. These realistic training scenarios help ensure our members are prepared to respond quickly and effectively during an emergency.









Jackson Honored for Military Service

The Illinois Air National Guard honored U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Chad Jackson during a retirement ceremony July 15 at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria. Jackson's military career began in the U.S. Marine Corps before he continued his service in the Illinois Air National Guard. Family, friends and fellow service members gathered to celebrate his dedicated service, leadership and lasting impact on the Airmen he mentored throughout his career.



182nd Airlift Wing Fire Crash, Rescue Station Receives Honor Award at 2025 DAF Design Awards Program

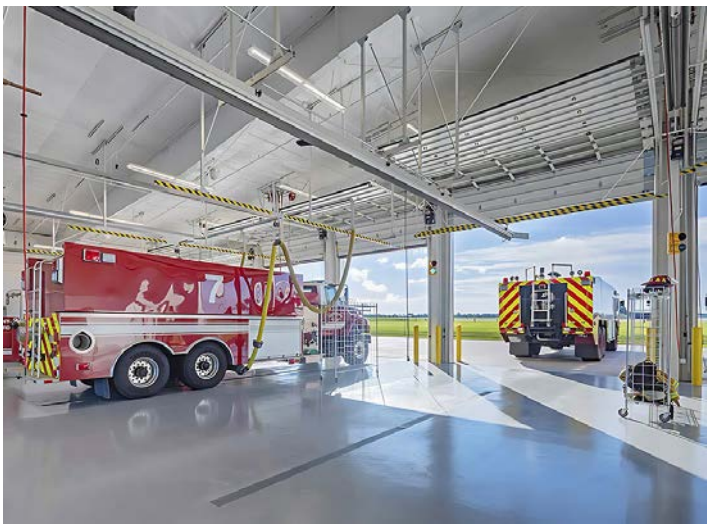
The new Fire Crash / Rescue Station at the 182nd Airlift Wing has received the Honor Award in the Facilities New Construction Category at the 2025 DAF Design Awards Program.

This facility reflects a strong focus on mission readiness, sustainability, and the well being of the first responders who serve there.

Key features of the station include:

- Mission Ready: A flexible layout designed to adapt to future operational needs.
- Energy Efficient: High performance building systems and a zoned hydronic radiant slab HVAC approach that supports long term energy savings.
- Health Focused: Interior planning that supports contamination control protocols while maintaining efficient response times.
- Durability: Robust wall and roof systems built to meet Air Force standards.

The facility represents a continued commitment to delivering high quality, resilient infrastructure for the Air Force community.









Moyer Promoted to Colonel, Assumes Command of 183rd Mission Support Group

Col. John Moyer was recently promoted to the rank of colonel and assumed command of the 183rd Mission Support Group.

Moyer previously served as the 183rd Wing's Inspector General, ensuring readiness, compliance, and welfare across the wing. In his new role as the Mission Support Group Commander, he will oversee the infrastructure, security, and support services that enable the Wing's daily operations and global mission readiness.

Four 183rd Wing Airmen Graduate Basic Military Training

Col. Shawn Strahle, Commander, 183rd Wing in Springfield, recently attended Air Force basic military training graduation at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

Four new 183rd Wing members were among those graduating that day: Airman 1st Class Adam Hayward, Airman 1st Class Ethan Ford, Airman 1st Class Bennett Karr, and Airman 1st Class Benjamin Strahle, Col. Strahle's son.



182nd CES Puts Skills to Work on Training Buildings

Behind every successful mission is a strong foundation.

The Civil Engineer Squadron Structures team puts their skills to work on training buildings, helping ensure Airmen have safe, functional and mission-ready facilities.

From construction and repairs to solving challenges in the field, CE and Structures personnel play a vital role in keeping the 182nd ready to train, operate and accomplish the mission.



Illinois Air National Guard Airman 1st Class Leonardo Rendon, a civil engineer structures specialist with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, cuts dry wall.



Airman 1st Class Ivonne Estrada, left, and Airman 1st Class Leonardo Rendon, both civil engineer structures specialists with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, remove nails from a railing structure.



Airman 1st Class Larry Ramirez, left, and Airman 1st Class Leonardo Rendon, both civil engineering structures specialists with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, remove nails from a railing structure.



Illinois Air National Guard Airman 1st Class Caden Rachel, a civil engineer structures specialist with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, removes wood from the roof of a training building.



Illinois Air National Guard Airman 1st Class Leonardo Rendon, a civil engineer structures specialist with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, bolts in dry wall inside a training building during August drill at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria. (Illinois Air National Guard photos by Tech. Sgt. Wynndermere Shaw)



Illinois Air National Guard Airman 1st Class Ivonne Estrada, a civil engineer structures specialist with the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron, removes bolts off of a railing structure during August drill at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria on July 31.

TAG Visits Troops in Field



1-106th Aviation Regiment

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kehinde Salami, Senior Enlisted Leader of the Illinois National Guard, visited Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, while the unit was conducting annual training at Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center, Michigan, Aug. 8.

During the visit, Boyd and Salami spoke with Soldiers about the battalion's aviation mission, training and readiness. Four service members were recognized for their professionalism, dedication and outstanding performance with command coins:

• Staff Sgt. Joseph Thomas — 35F Intelligence Analyst, from Springfield, Illinois, Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 1-106th AVN BN

• Maj. Eric Weber — a 15B Aviation Officer from Peoria, Illinois, with the HHC, 1-106th AVN BN

• Capt. Benjamin Meyers — a 90A Logistics Officer from Rochester, Illinois, with the 65th Troop Command

• Staff Sgt. Nicholas Rhodes — a 15T3O UH-60 Helicopter Repairer/ Crew Member from Auburn, Illinois, with the Company D, 1-106th Assault Helicopter Battalion

108th MMB

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, Brig. Gen. Daniel Kramer II, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Michigan Air National Guard, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kehinde Salami, Senior Enlisted Leader, Illinois National Guard, visited the 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion based in North Riverside, Illinois.

During the visit, Boyd and Salami met with the battalion's leadership.

The leaders discussed the battalion's mission, training and readiness while learning more about the unit's ongoing operations and the Soldiers who support them.



708th Medical Company Ground Ambulance



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard, Brig. Gen. Daniel Kramer II, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Michigan Air National Guard, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kehinde Salami, Senior Enlisted Leader of the Illinois National Guard, visited Soldiers of the 708th Medical Company (Ground Ambulance).

The 708th is based at the North Riverside Armory and is part of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

During the visit, Boyd and Salami spoke with Soldiers about their training, readiness and mission. They also recognized two Soldiers for their professionalism, dedication and outstanding performance by presenting them with their command coins:

- Sgt. Cycilia Mullaney, a 68W Combat Medic Specialist from Schaumburg, Illinois
- 2nd Lt. Roland Asongakap, a 70B Medical Service Officer from Yorkville, Illinois

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710th Medical Company Area Support



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, Brig. Gen. Daniel Kramer II, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Michigan Air National Guard, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kehinde Salami, Senior Enlisted Leader of the Illinois National Guard, visited Soldiers of the 710th Medical Company (Area Support).

During the visit, Boyd and Salami spoke with Soldiers in the 710th and asked about their training. Boyd and Salami also recognized several individuals for their professionalism, dedication and outstanding performance by presenting them with their command coins.

The following Soldiers were recognized:

- Capt. Robert Bick, a 66H Medical-Surgical Nurse
- Spc. Vissea Arnold Cabalan, a 68W Combat Medic Specialist
- Sgt. Angel Guzman, a 68W Combat Medic Specialist
- Spc. Ajhei Hawthorne, a 25U Signal Operations Support Specialist
- Spc. Joi Witherspoon, a 68W Combat Medic Specialist

Photos by Spc. Davanh B. Sanamixay, Illinois National Guard JFHQ Public Affairs, and Sgt. 1st Class Robert R. Adams, Illinois National Guard JFHQ Public Affairs



1744th Transportation Company

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, Brig. Gen. Daniel Kramer II, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Michigan Air National Guard, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kehinde Salami, Senior Enlisted Leader of the Illinois National Guard, visited Soldiers of the 1744th Transportation Company, commanded by Capt. Mhariel Stirgus.

Boyd and Salami met with Soldiers and discussed the unit's mission, readiness, and experiences. At the time of the visit, members of the company were also conducting tactical vehicle operations and convoy training.

Five Soldiers were recognized for their professionalism, dedication, and outstanding performance with command coins:

- Staff Sgt. Robert Leonard, an 88M Motor Transport Operator from Warrenville, Illinois
- 1st Lt. Isaiah Antonio, a 90A Logistics Officer from Belleville, Michigan
- Spc. Gozun Jeffrey, an 88M Motor Transport Operator from Waukegan, Illinois
- Sgt. Ivan Rico, an 88M Motor Transport Operator from Chicago, Illinois
- Spc. Sampson Ansah, an 88M Motor Transport Operator from Chicago, Illinois





Maloney Selected as 183rd Chief's Choice Award Recipient

Airman Kristina Maloney was chosen as a recipient of the 183rd Wing's Chief's Choice Award. Maloney distinguished herself as an exemplary Airman upon her return from technical school by going above and beyond in the 183d Force Support Squadron. The Chief's Choice award is presented to exceptional Airmen by the 183rd Chief's Council.

Burash Promoted to Chief Master Sergeant

U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Marvin Burash, center, the chief enlisted manager of the operations flight for the 264th Combat Communications Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, receives his service dress uniform coat from family members during his promotion ceremony in Peoria, Illinois, June 6. The traditional donning of the service dress coat symbolizes the support essential to a service member having advanced to the next rank. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman Senior Noah Hardin)



183rd Wing Medical Group Tests Ability to Respond, Manage Emergency Scenario

Story by Staff Sgt. Paul Lauricella
183rd Wing Public Affairs

Members of the 183rd Wing Medical Group conducted a mass casualty exercise June 6, 2026, at the 183rd Wing which tested their ability to respond to and manage a large-scale emergency scenario.

The exercise utilized Student Flight members as injured role players. Prior to the training event, volunteers received moulage makeup and simulated injuries designed to replicate realistic trauma conditions. The Student Flight participants then acted as casualties, allowing medical personnel to practice patient assessment, triage, treatment and coordination during a high-stress environment.

The training scenario challenged medical teams to rapidly evaluate injuries, prioritize care and provide treatment while operating under conditions that mirrored a real-world mass casualty incident.

Mass casualty exercises are an important component of readiness training, enabling medical personnel to practice procedures and identify areas for improvement in a controlled environment. The use of moulage and role players enhances the realism of the exercise, helping participants develop decision-making skills and refine response processes.









106th Aviation Regiment Makes Special Delivery to Royal Military

Company B, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, based in Kankakee, flew a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter to the Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in Grayling, Michigan, to retrieve supplies rigged by the Nashville, Tennessee-based 861st Theater Aerial Delivery unit. The supplies included personal gear and water for the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, based in Canterbury, and the Royal Welsh, based in Cardiff, United Kingdom. The 1-106th successfully delivered the supplies to the forward operating base occupied by the two units at Camp Grayling. (Photo by Spc. Davanh B. Sanamixay, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)



‘True Selfless Servant’ Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel

Story and photos by
Spc. Davanh Sanamixay
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Aaron A. Hepner, who oversees operations for the Peoria-based 65th Troop Command, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel during a ceremony Friday, Aug. 14, at Heartland Community College.

Col. Jason Carter, commander of the 65th Troop Command, presided over the ceremony, praising Hepner’s dedication and leadership. Hepner’s wife, Jennifer, and their sons, Arlo and Theo, pinned the new lieutenant colonel insignia onto his uniform.

Hepner, a resident of Downs, Illinois, has served in the military for 16 1/2 years, including 14 years of commissioned service. He serves as the S3 (operations officer) for the 65th Troop Command in Peoria, Illinois. Hepner oversees operations for a complex brigade that includes an aviation battalion, a field artillery battalion, the 5th Civil Support Team, the 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, and the 144th Army Band among other elements. The brigade has subordinate units throughout Illinois.

During his remarks, Carter highlighted Hepner’s dedication to Soldiers and his ability to take on challenging roles throughout his career.

“You go above and beyond to take care of Soldiers,” Carter said. “You are a true selfless servant.”

Carter also emphasized the significance of Hepner’s promotion, noting the increased responsibility that comes with serving as a lieutenant colonel and the competitive nature of reaching the rank.

“That is a huge testament to what the organization thinks about your leadership, to be able to select you above your peers to get to that mark as lieutenant colonel,” Carter said.



Five-year-old Arlo Hepner, the son of Illinois Army National Guard Lt. Col. Aaron A. Hepner pins his father’s new lieutenant colonel rank onto his uniform as Hepner’s wife, Jennifer, hold their other son, 1-year-old Theo, as Col. Jason Carter, commander of the 65th Troop Command, looks on during Hepner’s promotion ceremony at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois, Aug. 14, 2026. Hepner, who serves as the S3 operations officer for the Peoria-based 65th Troop Command, was promoted from major to lieutenant colonel after more than 16 years of military service.

During his remarks, Hepner expressed gratitude to his family, fellow service members and mentors who supported and influenced him throughout his career. He also reflected on the importance of relationships and trust in his approach to leadership.

"Mission success follows relationships, not the other way around," Hepner said. "Social capital must be built before a crisis. You cannot create trust on demand."

Hepner commissioned in 2011 through the Accelerated Officer Candidate School at Fort McClellan, Alabama, after starting his military journey with basic combat training at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 2010. As a career chemical officer, his previous leadership and staff assignments include:

- Decontamination platoon leader for the 445th Chemical Company in Shiloh, Illinois.
- Commander of the 135th Chemical Company in Machesney Park, Illinois.
- Logistics officer (S4) and executive officer for the 44th Chemical Battalion in Bloomington, Illinois.
- Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) operations officer and staff officer with the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade in Normal, Illinois.

In 2019, Hepner deployed to Bagram, Afghanistan, where he was awarded the Afghanistan Campaign Medal and the NATO Non-Article 5 Medal. Following his deployment, he served with the COVID-19 Joint Task Force in Springfield, Illinois, tracking critical personnel and logistics metrics.

Hepner credited the Soldiers, noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, peers and leaders he served alongside with helping shape him throughout his career.

"I've tried to learn something from every single one of you in every assignment that I've had, and I look forward to continuing to build that trust and relationship as we move forward together," Hepner said.

In his civilian career, Hepner works as a regional maintenance manager and Title 32 military technician. Hepner graduated from Lexington High School in 2003. He holds an associate degree from Heartland Community College in Normal and earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice sciences from Illinois State University in Bloomington in 2008. He is a lifetime member of the National Guard Association of Illinois.

His military decorations include the Meritorious Service Medal, two Army Commendation Medals, four Army Achievement Medals, three Reserve Components Achievement Medals, and the Humanitarian Service Medal.

The ceremony's invocation and benediction were delivered by Hepner's brother, Father Tim Hepner, a Catholic priest in the Catholic Diocese of Peoria. The event concluded with the playing of the Army Song and a reception for family, friends, and colleagues at White Oak Brewing. from every single one of you in every assignment that I've had, and I look forward to continuing to build that trust and relationship as we move forward together," Hepner said.

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The ceremony's invocation and benediction were delivered by Hepner's brother, Father Tim Hepner, a Catholic priest in the Catholic Diocese of Peoria. The event concluded with the playing of the Army Song and a reception for family, friends, and colleagues at White Oak Brewing.



Newly promoted Lt. Col. Aaron A. Hepner thanks family, fellow service members and mentors for their support throughout his career during a promotion ceremony Aug. 14 at Heartland Community College, Normal.

First Sergeant With 'Toughness of Infantry and Compassion of Chaplain' Retires After Nearly Three Decades of Military Service

Story and photos by
Spc. Davanh Sanamixay
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Greg Hoffman didn't want to be a first sergeant.

He saw what his friend and mentor, Command Sgt. Maj. (retired) Dena Ballowe, endured as she prepared the 3537th Surface Maintenance Co. for Hurricane Katrina duty in 2005 as the brand-new unit first sergeant. Hoffman decided "Being a first sergeant is not a good idea."

But, as with many things throughout his life, "God had other plans," he said during his June 6 retirement ceremony on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

Hoffman retired after serving as the first sergeant of the headquarters company of the Illinois Army National Guard's Joint Force Headquarters for the past six years.

"He has the toughness of an Infantryman combined with the compassion of a Chaplain," said Maj. Lavern Meissner, 1st Sgt. Hoffman's commander at Joint Force Headquarters. "He did the right things for the right reasons throughout his career."

Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca, the Director of the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff, presented Hoffman with the Meritorious Service Medal and praised him as a Soldier as well as a dedicated family man and friend.

"He led with humility. He led with professionalism," Fonseca said during the ceremony. "He led with genuine care for Soldiers and their families."

Hoffman enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1992 as an Infantryman,



Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca, Director of the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff, presents 1st Sgt. Greg Hoffman a Certificate of Appreciation during a retirement ceremony June 6 on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Hoffman retired after nearly three decades of service.

and he was good at it. He earned the Expert Infantry Badge on his first attempt, successfully completing all 27 required tasks. As part of the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, he served as a unit armorer, commander's radio telephone operator, and Dragon gunner.

But he got out of the Army in 1995 after that first enlistment. He received a bachelor's degree in business administration from Lincoln Christian College and was ready to follow a civilian career path.

Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the military activations that followed. In December 2002 he enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard's Springfield-based 3637th Surface Maintenance Co. as a diesel mechanic. In September 2005, he was activated for Hurricane Katrina and after returning from helping devastated communities down South, the unit began training for its 2007 deployment to Iraq. Hoffman and his fellow Soldiers spent a year at Al Asad Airbase in Iraq.

After the Iraq deployment, Hoffman began his full-time military career as a Federal

Technician at Joint Force Headquarters, serving as a Personnel Security Technician before transitioning into human resources and later becoming the State Chaplain's Assistant, a position eventually redesignated as Master Religious Affairs Specialist. He was promoted to Master Sergeant in 2015.

Then, just as the global COVID-19 pandemic started, he was selected to serve as the Joint Force Headquarters' First Sergeant. During the pandemic, headquarters Soldiers were activated to man the Illinois National Guard's COVID testing sites and later COVID immunization sites as well as respond to civil disturbance in the wake of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Throughout these activations, Hoffman provided steady leadership while ensuring the welfare of Soldiers and their families.

Those who served alongside Hoffman often point to his leadership style as his greatest contribution. "He set the standard for that position," said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Vince Lambert. "He was about getting things done and taking care of Soldiers."

Hoffman credited the Holy Spirit; his parents, Daniel and Michele Hoffman, and his spouse, Jodi, for his success in the Army. Daniel Hoffman is a Veteran who served as a combat medic in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971.

First Sgt. Hoffman and Jodi's two sons, Toby and Logan, have become "truly good," people, he said. Jodi, he added, "Never said 'no' to any of my weird ideas." She didn't complain about him spending time with the "Over 40 Running Club" helping Soldiers with their physical fitness, talking with State Command Chaplain (Colonel) Steve Foster about 'Dr. Who' episodes, or the hours in his woodworking shop making gifts for Soldiers. "The best path is the one we are on together," Hoffman told his wife.

"Behind every deployment, every late night, every emergency activation, every weekend drill, and every phone call that starts with 'Something came up at work,' there is a family making sacrifices right alongside them," Fonseca said. "You have left the Illinois National Guard better than you found it."



Right, First Sgt. Greg Hoffman stands at attention during the reading of the retirement order during a retirement ceremony June 6 on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Hoffman served in the Army for nearly three decades including a deployment to Iraq and multiple domestic responses including for Hurricane Katrina.



McKennedy Promoted to Captain

Hazel McKennedy pins the rank of captain onto her father, Capt. Ryan E. McKennedy, during his promotion ceremony at Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, July 29, 2026. Newly promoted Capt. McKennedy is the commander of Forward Support Company H. Family members participated in the ceremony recognizing McKennedy's promotion and continued service to the Illinois National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouché)

183rd Wing Run 2 Remember 5K Honors Departed Wing Members

More than 100 runners and walkers from the 183rd Wing participated in the annual Run 2 Remember 5K Aug. 3, honoring departed 183rd Wing members.

The event brought together Airmen and family members to remember their legacy and celebrate the enduring spirit of the 183rd Wing.













Welcome Home 232nd CSSB

Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion were welcomed home Aug. 9 on Camp Lincoln following their deployment to Europe in support of Operation Global Competition.

Family, friends and fellow Illinois National Guard members gathered to recognize the Soldiers and celebrate their safe return. Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, served as the keynote speaker, welcoming the Soldiers home and recognizing their service, sacrifice and commitment to the mission.

The ceremony also marked a new chapter for the Springfield based battalion as Lt. Col. Daniel Johnson relinquished command of the 232nd CSSB to Lt. Col. Alex Dial. Johnson led the battalion through its deployment and return home, while Dial now assumes responsibility for leading the unit into its next chapter.



Lt. Col. Alex Dial, incoming commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, receives the battalion colors from Col. Bradley Roach, commander of the 34th Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, during a change of command ceremony in Springfield, Aug. 9. The passing of the colors symbolizes Dial's assumption of command and the responsibility for the battalion and its Soldiers. The ceremony was held in conjunction with the 232nd CSSB's welcome home following its deployment to Europe in support of Operation Global Competition.



Soldiers with the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion stand in formation during a welcome home and change of command ceremony in Springfield, Aug. 9. The ceremony welcomed the Soldiers home following their deployment to Europe in support of Operation Global Competition.









Top left, Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, delivers remarks. Above, Lt. Col. Daniel Johnson, outgoing commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. Left, Col. Bradley Roach, Commander of the 34th Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, delivers remarks during the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion welcome home and change of command ceremony. Right, Lt. Col. Alex Dial, incoming commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion.





Soldiers with the Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion stand in formation during a welcome home and change of command ceremony in Springfield, Aug. 9. The ceremony welcomed the Soldiers home following their deployment to Europe in support of Operation Global Competition.

U.S. Army photos by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Illinois National Guard's 710th Medical Company Tests Readiness During Mass-Casualty Training

Soldiers with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support) put their medical readiness to the test during a mass-casualty training exercise from August 8-11 at North Strike at Camp Grayling in Grayling, Michigan.

The simulated influx of casualties required medical teams to rapidly assess and triage patients, provide lifesaving treatment, coordinate care and prepare casualties for evacuation. The fast-paced scenario challenged Soldiers to communicate effectively, work as a team and make critical decisions under pressure.

Training events like this help the 710th sharpen its medical skills and remain prepared to respond when every second counts.



Spc. Vissea Arnold Cabalan, a 68W Combat Medic Specialist with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support), records information on simulated casualties before conducting physical assessments during a mass-casualty training exercise at Northern Strike, Camp Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 10.



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support) carry a simulated casualty on a litter to a treatment area during a mass-casualty training exercise at North Strike, Camp Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 10, 2026. The exercise challenged Soldiers to safely move casualties, coordinate patient care and rapidly transition injured personnel to medical treatment in a simulated high-casualty environment.



An Illinois Army National Guard Soldier with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support) marks treatment information on a simulated casualty mannequin during a mass-casualty training exercise at Northern Strike, Camp Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 10. The markings help medical personnel track the casualty's injuries, assessments and treatment as the patient moves through different stages of care during the simulated mass-casualty scenario.



A simulated casualty mannequin displays realistic battlefield injuries during a mass-casualty training exercise conducted by Soldiers with the Illinois Army National Guard's 710th Medical Company (Area Support) during Northern Strike at Camp Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 10, 2026. The mannequin was used to help create a realistic training environment as medical personnel practiced assessing, triaging and treating traumatic injuries under simulated combat conditions.



An Illinois Army National Guard Soldier with the 710th Medical Company (Area Support) reassesses simulated casualties following treatment during a mass-casualty training exercise at North Strike, Camp Grayling, Michigan, Aug. 10, 2026. The exercise required Soldiers to monitor patients after initial treatment, evaluate their condition and determine any additional care needed before evacuation.

(U.S. Army photos by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)



Bair Honored at Retirement Ceremony

U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Kayla Bair, right, a commander support staff specialist with the 182nd Contingency Response Group, Illinois Air National Guard, receives a shadow box from Master Sgt. Anna Brinkmeier during her retirement ceremony in Peoria, June 7. The presentation of a shadow box is a military tradition that highlights a service member's career achievements, ranks, and decorations upon retirement.



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Kayla Bair, right, a commander support staff specialist with the 182nd Contingency Response Group, Illinois Air National Guard, poses for a photograph with Master Sgt. Anna Brinkmeier while holding a signed C-130H Hercules print during her retirement ceremony in Peoria, June 7. The print serves as a traditional memento signed by fellow unit members to commemorate her service. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)





Training Today, Ready Tomorrow

Airmen from the 126th Air Refueling Wing and 182nd Airlift Wing participated in a two week Air Education and Training Command deicer course at Scott Air Force Base. The hands on training gave Airmen experience operating deicing equipment while strengthening the skills needed to keep aircraft operational during winter weather and maintain mission readiness. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Airman Gianna Linhorst)

1970th Quartermaster Company Plays Vital Role During Super Garuda Shield in Indonesia

The Illinois Army National Guard's 34th Division Support Brigade Command Team, Col. Brad Roach and Command Sgt. Maj. Joe Cistaro, enjoyed water purified by the North Riverside-based 1970th Quartermaster Company while visiting troops during the Super Garuda Shield exercise in Indonesia.

This U.S. Army Pacific-sponsored exercise, which involves approximately 3,000 Combined Armed Forces, demonstrates the shared purpose of participating nations, enhancing interoperability and readiness to address regional challenges. This exercise reflects the administration's commitment to peace through strength and the enduring partnership between the United States and Indonesia.

The Soldiers of the 1970th Quartermaster are playing a vital role in the exercise by providing U.S. and Allied Soldiers with potable water that the unit is purifying from an Indonesian river. The exercise runs from mid-August to mid-September. (Courtesy photos.)





HSC 404th MEB Conducts Warrior Task Training

Soldiers from the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade Headquarters Support Company focused on Army Warrior Tasks during annual training at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, June 7-8.

Soldiers conducted land navigation training, beginning with a classroom portion before moving on to a practical exercise in the field. Teams were required to find points using only a paper map, compass, and protractor. The unit's S1 and Engineer team successfully finished the course in the fastest time.

Army Warrior Task training included reacting to indirect fire, moving as a team, and searching and detaining.








MARSEILLES TRAINING AREA






U.S. ARMY





Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 123rd Engineer Battalion pose for a photo with Illinois Army National Guard senior leadership at the Crestwood Armory during their annual training in June 2026. The battalion's Sparta-based 631st Engineer Support Co. and 2118th Asphalt Detachment built a running track at the Illinois Army National Guard's Crestwood Armory saving the taxpayer between $250,000 to $350,000 over their 2-weeks of annual training. (Courtesy photo.)

123rd Engineer Soldiers Build Running Track, Renovate Armory

The Soldiers Built Skills for War Fighting Mission and Saved Taxpayers Big Bucks

Illinois Army National Guard's 123rd Engineer Battalion worked on some 'Do It Ourselves' projects in late May and June giving the Soldiers valuable training and saving the taxpayer between $470,000 to $770,000.

Soldiers from the Sparta-based 631st Engineer Support Co. and 2118th Asphalt Detachment built a running track at the Illinois Army National Guard's Crestwood Armory saving the taxpayer between $250,000 to $350,000 over their 2-weeks of annual training.

The Macomb-based 616th Engineer Utilities Detachment and 661st Engineer Construction Co. did renovation work at the Illinois Army National Guard's Forest Park Armory preparing the facility to accept new high-technology ILARNG units around October. The work included re-piping the heating system, installing LED lighting, and replacing ceiling tiles. It could've cost the Illinois Army National Guard from $225,000 to $418,000 had it been



Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion re-piped the heating system at the Forest Park Armory as part of their annual training in June.



Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion work at the Forest Park Armory as part of their annual training in June



Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion install LED lighting at the Forest Park Armory as part of their annual training in June.

contracted out.

"Our Engineers did an outstanding job at both sites and their fellow Soldiers will reap the benefits through better facilities," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "The work they did both trained them for their war-time mission and will have a lasting impact on the organization through improved facilities."

The Soldiers enjoyed the work. "We had a really good time," said Sgt. Seth Michaels, a carpentry and masonry specialist (12W) who worked at the Forest Park Armory. There he replaced doorways as well as installed drop ceilings and stairway railings among other construction tasks. "This was something new. It was more (military job)-based than other training we've done."

The Forest Park Armory needed the work, Michaels said. "We really flipped it." The Illinois Army National Guard acquired the long-vacant facility from the Army Reserve last year. After the renovation, the Illinois Army National Guard is slated to move new units into the building this fall, including a cutting edge high-technology electronics warfare battalion.

The Crestwood Armory, which houses multiple units, gets a physical training track on what had been a vacant lot. Capt. Cory Manns, who led the Crestwood track construction, said the project was more "public facing" than previous work the unit has done. "People can see it from the street." However, the Engineers have a history of improving Illinois Army National Guard infrastructure. For example, the Engineers have done extensive work at Marseilles Training Area where they built and improved roads and range berms among other projects.

At Crestwood, the Engineers took a little time to orient the Illinois Army National Guard's Foxtrot Company of the Recruiting Retention Battalion's Recruit Sustainment Program to some of their military jobs. The Recruit Sustainment Program is for



Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion work on a culvert at the Crestwood Armory as they install a running track as part of their annual training in June.

those who enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard but have not yet completed Army Basic Training and their job training. The program helps them prepare for Basic Training and life in the Army National Guard.

"This is actual real-world training where every bit of work is being invested back into the Illinois National Guard," Manns said. The track project allowed the Soldiers to do real work in their military occupations, and the officers and senior noncommissioned officers got to work on planning and management skills. "This gave us a chance to work our project management muscles," Manns said. "The project came together with precision, and the Soldier's work was integrated with success."

The Soldiers showed extraordinary work ethic, Manns said. "They dove into the work both feet first. The best retention tool is getting them out there doing their jobs."



Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion install LED lighting at the Forest Park Armory as part of their annual training in June.

Capt. Shannon Coppula led the Soldiers doing work at the Forest Park Armory. She said the Soldiers got to work with experienced Illinois Department of Military Affairs tradesmen who have been working on the facility since the Illinois National Guard acquired it. The opportunity to learn from those highly skilled craftsmen with many years of experience was a valuable experience for the young Soldiers – and the Soldiers soaked it all in.

"They got a lot of work done over two weeks," Coppula said. "I'm just very proud of my Joes."



A Soldier from the 123rd Engineer Battalion adjusts a drop ceiling at the Forest Park Armory as part of his annual training in June.



Twenty-three Airmen and civilians assigned to Inspector General offices from across the United States attended the National Guard Bureau's annual Inspector General course, hosted this year by the New York Air National Guard's 107th Attack Wing, June 9-11, 2026. The conference brought together IG professionals to discuss program management topics while giving attendees a forum to compare practices across the active-duty, Guard and Reserve components. (New York Air National Guard photo by Capt Jason Carr)

107th Attack Wing Hosts NGB Advanced IG Course

Master Sgt Ryan Scott, IG Superintendent assigned to the 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, listens to best practices for Unit Self-Assessment Programs, June 10, Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. "I think this collaborative approach helps things run smoother and more efficiently, rather than 'that's just the way we've always done things'," said Scott. (New York Air National Guard photo by Capt Jason Carr)





Operation Penguin Visits 182nd Airlift Wing

Veterans, sponsors and volunteers with the Greater Peoria Honor Flight visited the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria during Operation Penguin June 23. Airmen and Soldiers from the Illinois Air and Army National Guard provided static displays for the veterans during their visit to the Illinois Air National Guard wing. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)









Two Illinois Army National Guard Teams Build Partner Capacity in Strategic Regions

Soldiers from the 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade have returned to the United States following historic, high-impact deployments across two distinct combatant commands.

From June 2025 through early 2026, the 6th Battalion's Medical Advisor Team 6630 deployed to the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, while the Logistics Company Advisor Team 6640 deployed to Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Both teams built partner capacity as highly specialized experts. They advised, supported, liaised and assisted foreign partner forces to deter regional threats and foster enduring international alliances.

By placing mature, highly experienced National Guard advisors alongside partner-nation leaders, the team's built tactical proficiency and drove systemic, long-term institutional reform that advances U.S. and allied security objectives. Both teams celebrated their accomplishments from the deployments with family and friends at an August 9 welcome home ceremony at Heritage Hall near the battalion's headquarters on Rock Island Arsenal.



Maj. Micah Bennet, team leader for logistics company advisor team (LCAT) 6640, 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, Illinois Army National Guard, delivers remarks during the welcome home ceremony at the Heritage Hall in Rock Island Arsenal in Rock Island Aug. 9. The LCAT, as part of the goal of increasing the Djiboutian Army's crisis response unit, spearheaded, planned, and executed a week long training exercise that had 24 hour operations which also included the possibility of enemy attack and advancement. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

Modernizing Healthcare Systems in Northern Iraq

Deployed from June 2025 to February 2026 in support of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, Medical Advisor Team 6630 was attached to the active Army's 3rd Security Force Assistance Brigade in northern Iraq. Led by Maj. Tom Kadela and Sgt. 1st Class Jason Pizza, the team was tasked with advising the Kurdish Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to support the enduring defeat of Islamic State forces.

The medical advisor team executed its mission with far-reaching strategic results:

- Strategic Policy Reform: Kadela personally mentored leadership at the Directorate General of Medical Affairs, securing official governmental approval for modernization policies that fundamentally overhauls the Peshmerga Medical Corps.
- National-Level Reporting: The team's objective, hands-on assessments of Peshmerga capabilities directly informed statutory quarterly reports to the U.S. Congress, helping to shape future defense investments in the region.
- Tactical Certification: Advisors trained and mentored three separate division medical staff teams, validating them as "fully operationally capable" after a rigorous 60-hour validation exercise.



Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter, executive officer of 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, Illinois Army National Guard, thanks Soldiers for all they accomplished during their recent overseas deployment during the welcome home ceremony for Medical Advisor Team 6630 and Logistics Company Advisor Team 6640 at the Heritage Hall on Rock Island Arsenal in Rock Island Aug. 9. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

• Coalition Integration: The team pioneered and led the first-ever Medical Operations Synchronization Team in the combined joint operations area, coordinating training efforts across 15 coalition nations to establish a unified medical continuum of care.

Strengthening Logistics and Crisis Response in Djibouti

Operating in East Africa from June 2025 to March 2026, Logistics Company Advisor Team 6640 was assigned to the Southern European Task Force-Africa Civil Affairs Battalion in support of AFRICOM Theater Security Cooperation. Led by Maj. Micah Bennett and Sgt. 1st Class David Holzrichter, the team of nine specialized logisticians completed more than 120 engagements to scale the logistics, sustainment and crisis response capabilities of the Djiboutian Army's elite rapid reaction unit, the Rapid Intervention Battalion, known as the BIR.

The logistics team's key milestones included:

• Critical Infrastructure Development: The team served as an instrumental bridge between the U.S. Embassy, U.S. and Djiboutian military engineers, and the Djiboutian Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport to design, approve and execute a vital 21-kilometer route improvement project to the BIR's primary installation.

• Pioneering Training Initiatives: The team planned and executed the BIR's first-ever scout assessment and selection process, expanding the battalion staff's organic intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities.

• Justified Accord 2026: The team spearheaded the Djibouti-spoke of Exercise Justified Accord 2026. This weeklong, round-the-clock validation exercise tested the BIR's logistics forecasting, tactical decision-making and multi-domain operations against active opposing forces.

• State Partnership Program Integration: The advisors successfully integrated Kentucky National Guard State Partnership Program assets and Civil Affairs units with the Djiboutian Armed Forces, laying the groundwork for years of future cooperation.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, left, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard), Village of Addison Mayor Tom Hundley (center) and Chicagoland Veterans Campus Founder and President Lorenzo Fiorentino (right) participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the grand opening of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, June 27.

Retired Illinois Army National Guard Officer Brings Together Community to Preserve Military History, Strengthen Support for Veterans

Story and photos by
Spc. Justin Malone
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

The Illinois National Guard joined veterans, community leaders and supporters June 27 to celebrate the ribbon cutting of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison's historic district, a first-of-its-kind destination that combines military museums, veteran service organizations, community spaces and support resources under one roof.

For Illinois National Guard Adjutant General and Commander of the Illinois National Guard Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the campus represents something larger than a collection of museums — it reflects the military's enduring commitment to serving others long after the uniform comes off.

"Like almost all veterans, when Lorenzo took off the uniform, he found a way to continue to serve others," Boyd said. "He assembled a group of veterans and community members who were also looking for a way to serve, got the broader community involved, and here we are today."

Founded by Illinois Army National Guard veteran Lorenzo Fiorentino, the Chicagoland Veterans Campus was built on a simple observation. While operating a smaller military museum, Fiorentino noticed that veterans often became more willing to share stories of their service.

"We noticed how many veterans really started opening

up," said Fiorentino, who retired as a major. "Families would tell us, 'He's never talked this much about the war,' or 'She's never shared anything about her service.'"

That realization inspired a broader vision, creating a place where veterans and their families could connect not only with history, but also with the people and resources available to help them.

The campus now brings together military museums, veteran service organizations, a veterans history library and resource offices designed to assist servicemembers, veterans and their families.

"The Chicagoland Veterans Campus ties together our military history, military associations, veteran service organizations, and programs that provide assistance to veterans in a holistic approach to support service members, veterans and their families," Boyd said.

Among the campus' most unique features is its Veterans History Library, where service members can preserve photographs, military records and personal stories that might otherwise be lost to time.

"The goal of the library is to archive Soldiers' stories," Fiorentino said. "These are the kinds of memories that can disappear over time. We want future generations to be able to learn from them."

Boyd said preserving those stories serves an important purpose beyond honoring the past.

"Preserving the history and telling the history of our military is important for the future of our military and the defense of our nation," Boyd said. "Our history inspires the next generation to serve, and it's important to tell it through as many platforms and mediums as possible."

That inspiration continues to resonate across Illinois. Boyd noted the Illinois National Guard achieved record enlistments in 2025 and remains on pace to meet its recruiting goals again this year, a testament to young Americans choosing to serve after learning about those who came before them.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, delivers remarks during the grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, Illinois, June 27. Boyd highlighted the importance of preserving military history, supporting service members, veterans and their families, and inspiring future generations to serve through organizations like the Chicagoland Veterans Campus.

Mayor Tom Hundley, a U.S. Navy veteran, welcomed the campus to Addison and praised its mission of supporting veterans beyond military service.

"As a fellow veteran, what makes me most proud is that this is more than a collection of museums," Hundley said. "Lorenzo and his group are building a community with veteran services and resources — a place where those who have served can come for help and continue to get involved."

Boyd said the people who made the campus possible embody the same values that define military service.

"All the people Lorenzo brought into the mix to pull this together and sustain it day after day is very much a continuation of our military values — honor, duty, commitment and selfless service," Boyd said.

The opening of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus comes as the nation commemorates the 250th anniversary of American independence, providing a lasting place where military service, community and history come together.

"I am honored to help celebrate the continuation of a mission rooted in the values of our military and our nation," Boyd said. "This campus will continue serving veterans, their families and future generations for years to come."

Preserving Independence



The 126th Air Refueling Wing flew the KC-97 in the 1960s to refuel U.S. military aircraft. The Illinois Air National Guard unit began flying the KC-135 Stratotanker in 1976 to accomplish its aerial refueling mission.

126th Air Refueling Wing dates back to 108th Observation Squadron in 1927

Editor's Note: *During 2026, the United States of America is celebrating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.*

Join us as we look back at Illinois National Guard events which helped America secure, preserve, and celebrate its Independence.

The largest and oldest of the three Illinois Air National Guard units, the 126th Air Refueling Wing, traces its history and lineage back to 1927 when the 108th Observation Squadron, 33rd Division Aviation, Illinois National Guard organized at the 131st Infantry Armory in Chicago.

On July 1, 1927, the unit obtained federal recognition and received its first aircraft, PT-1's, during its first encampment later that year at Camp Grant, near Rockford, Illinois. The unit had an initial compliment of 16 officers and 74 enlisted men from among the hundreds of World War I veterans in Chicago.

Under the leadership of its first



The patch designed by Walt Disney Studios for the 108th Observation Squadron.



The first KC-135A model arrives at the 126th Air Refueling Wing on Dec. 1, 1976. The Illinois Air National Guard unit continues to fly the KC-135 Stratotanker to accomplish its aerial refueling mission.

National Guard Commander, Major McElvain, the 108th Observation Squadron developed into a highly trained and efficient National Guard Aviation Unit. The Unit received advanced aircraft as it progressed including the open-Cockpit O-2H, 0-38B, and 0-38H type biplanes and the 0-31 single gull-wing aircraft. From 1927 to 1939, the squadron participated in 13 Summer encampments with the 33rd Infantry Division at Camp Grant. In 1939, mid-wing 0-47 aircraft became a familiar sight in the Chicago area.

In 1937, disastrous floods hit the southern Illinois towns of Karnak, Rosiclare, Mound City, Metropolis and Shawneetown. The 108th played a vital role in aiding the communities by performing various missions such as reconnaissance over levees, dropping food, medicine and supplies to stranded people and livestock. The unit also took aerial photos over flooded areas.

Capt. Wilson V. Newhall, later to become a Major General and the first Chief of Staff of the Illinois Air National Guard, distinguished himself in the line of duty during the floods. He spotted breaks in the levees and transmitted the warning to authorities in time to evacuate people, saving lives. Newhall received the Distinguished Service Medal, for his leadership.

In 1939, with war clouds enveloping Europe, the 108th Observation Squadron was placed on alert along with the 33rd Infantry Division. The unit flew missions every Saturday and Sunday in coordination with ground troops. In 1940, the squadron received the first of its nine North American single wing observation aircraft, six 0-47A and three 0-47B types, to add to its inventory of four 0-38Es and one 0-31 gull wing planes. By the end of the year, the Squadron personnel consisted of 26 officers and 116 enlisted men. Most of the pilots had earned their wings in the Army Air Corps training centers, or in the rigorous Army schools during World War I. As 1940 ended, the unit moved into its new $679,000 hangar on the west side of Midway Airport.

During World War II, the 108th was based at Rio Hata, Panama Canal Zone, and later relocated to Howard Field, a more permanent site. The squadron performed a variety of missions. Due to the extensive enemy submarine activity in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean, the Squadron performed daily anti-submarine patrols. The planes carried two 30 caliber machine guns and two 450- pound depth charges. The squadron received an A-17, several A-12s and L-1s used for search and rescue and a vintage Stinson tri-motor aircraft. The unit also participated in defense penetration missions, mail runs from Howard Field to other parts of the Canal Zone and to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Guatemala and back to Howard Field, and photo missions with the Army and Air Corps.

After World War II, the 108th Squadron was assigned to the newly formed 126th Wing at Midway Airport in Chicago. Ever since this time, the history of the 108th Observation Squadron is synonymous with and included in the history of the 126th Air Refueling Wing. Scott Air Force Base is the Headquarters for the 126th Air Refueling Wing, Illinois Air National Guard.

Great Flood of 1993



The 126th Air Refueling Wing activated 748 personnel for state active duty to combat flooding in the summer of 1993. Wing personnel were deployed to many cities and sites along a 580 mile stretch of the Mississippi River.

Thousands of Illinois Guardsmen activated to **battle historic flooding**

Operation Wave Rider is the largest state active-duty mission in the number of personnel deployed and the second continuous running state active duty behind COVID.

More than 7,600 Soldiers and Airmen were activated after heavy rains led to record flooding of the Mississippi, Illinois, Rock, Sangamon, and Wabash rivers.

On July 1, 1993, Illinois Governor Jim Edgar alerted Maj. Gen. Donald Lynn, The Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard to prepare for a potential flood mission. Three days later, Lynn activated units for Operation Wave Rider.

Soldiers and Airmen provided support to 44 counties declared natural disaster areas by state and federal officials. Operations included security, levee maintenance and repair, sandbagging, search and rescue, water distribution, medical assistance, and aviation support.



Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard sandbag along the Mississippi, Illinois, Rock, Sangamon and Wabash rivers during flood operations in 1993.

Despite the extensive damage, Soldiers and Airmen proved valuable assistance to the disaster relief and cleanup resulting in zero loss of life.

By Dec. 1, only 33 Guardsmen remained in the hardest hit areas to provide additional security.



The Illinois National Guard's 2nd Infantry Regiment enters the gates of Camp Lincoln, Springfield, in the late 1800s. Vendors used to gather at the gate of Camp Lincoln to sell to the thousands of Soldiers who trained at the facility.

Military Board selects Springfield as location for Camp Lincoln, Illinois National Guard post

On May 18, 1877, the Illinois State Militia was officially re-designated the "Illinois National Guard," by the state of Illinois.

Prior to 1886, Illinois National Guard units drilled separately in pop up camps, usually around local town squares or city centers.

In 1885, Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby decided the Illinois National Guard needed a permanent post of operations.

Oglesby appointed a five-man military board that sought out an appropriate piece of land. The group looked at areas in Highland Park, Waukegan, Wilmington, Oregon, Quincy, Ottawa, Kankakee, and Springfield. After Springfield was chosen, the city shocked the public with the speed of construction to accommodate the needs of the Illinois National Guard.

On July 6, 1886, by order of Governor Richard J. Oglesby, Adjutant General Joseph W. Vance issued General Order 14. It read, "The permanent camp and rifle range established for the Illinois National Guard, near Springfield, is hereby designated and will be known as Camp Lincoln."

The camp consisted of 160 acres, is a mile long and a quarter mile wide and is just a half a mile from President Abraham Lincoln's tomb. The land originally cost $18,100. The citizens of Springfield raised $3,100 and the city paid for the remainder $15,000.

The city council passed an ordinance on April 7, 1886, to extend the city water mains to the camp at no cost and the military post received its water free of charge. The city also agreed to extend more



At right, a quiet day at Camp Lincoln.

than a mile of track for street cars. The first buildings cost $8,030.55 for a stable to house 100 horses, a quartermaster house, and an icehouse.

The first brigade encampment took place July 17-24, 1886. Camp Lincoln could only accommodate one brigade at a time for extended drills and maneuvers. Units rotated in and out.

After 1921, most of this activity transferred to Camp Grant in Rockford. A couple of noteworthy events occurred in the early 1900s.

In 1901, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt visited Camp Lincoln and reviewed the troops.

In 1934, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp was established at Camp Lincoln during the depression to help civilians find employment. Camp Lincoln serves as Headquarters for 13,000 Illinois Army and Air National Guard service members.

The oldest building on Camp Lincoln houses the Illinois State Military Museum. It was built in 1903 by Col. Culver, a member of the Illinois National Guard and Commander during the Spanish American War, construction company owner and prominent stone mason.



An ambulance wagon at Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

The museum building is commonly referred to as, "the castle" and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The museum draws 5,000 visitors annually from all around the world.

In addition, 10,000 school children journey to the Illinois State Military Museum from around the state to learn about equipment Illinois Guardsmen carried and the various missions at home and abroad throughout our history.



The Illinois 5th Infantry Bicycle Corps.

Illinois enjoys three-decades-long partnership with Poland

Since 1993, the Illinois National Guard has enjoyed partnership with Polish military forces through the State Partnership Program.

The purpose of the State Partnership Program (SPP) is to link the National Guard states and territories with partner countries to foster mutual interests and establish long-term relationships across all levels of society. The SPP with Poland was one of the first three SPP relationships initiated between the National Guard and the former Soviet Eastern Bloc countries.



Polish Land Forces 10th Logistics Brigade Deputy Commander Lt. Col. Dariusz Zaremba, right, discusses training with Illinois National Guard Maj. Tomas Akers. The Illinois National Guard Soldiers co-deployed with the Polish soldiers as advisers through their deployment as part of the State Partnership Program.



The partnership conducts military-to-military engagements and facilitates broader interagency engagements. The SPP has allowed hundreds of Illinois National Guard members to participate in exchanges with Polish forces.

The partnership helped Poland prepare for membership in NATO, with the European nation becoming a NATO member in March 1999. Poland has become a staunch U.S. ally.

Illinois' SPP with Poland has evolved into since its inception. The Illinois National Guard has co-deployed with every Polish rotation to Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003-2020. There were more than 30 co-deployments involving more than 32,000 Polish Soldiers.

What started as a collaboration to minimize instability and encourage democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union has turned into an impressive allegiance and friendship with a fully capable military force.

Through the SPP, the Illinois Army and Air National Guard servicemembers participate in annual, joint training exchanges with military forces and civil authorities within the Republic of Poland and have fought side-by-side with Polish forces in Afghanistan and, previously, in Iraq.

Now this partnership is playing a key role in the U.S. and European response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Illinois Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer Juan Morales, Polish Army Warrant Officer Marcin Partyka and Illinois Army National Guard 2nd Lt. Grzegorz Romanek work through various scenarios during training.



33rd Division ordered to Pacific Theater

The 33rd Division was inducted into federal service on March 5, 1941, in Chicago. The unit had roughly 11,000 men in its ranks and continued to receive augmentees throughout its training.

When news of Pearl Harbor broke, the Illinois National Guard's 33rd Division was training at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. At 5:00 a.m., Dec. 8 orders came through from Second Army instructing the division to combat-load and move out for anti-sabotage duty at industrial centers in Alcoa, Tennessee, and Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama.

By July 15, 1943, the Division had debarked in Hawaii. Here the units split up and carried out orders to defend the outer islands of Hawaii, including Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Niihau. They conducted island reconnaissance. Dry run alerts had companies operating within three minutes to wake, dress, secure equipment and clear the camp. In Hawaii they trained for mountain and jungle fighting and beach landings. They also received their final change of command with Maj. Gen. Percy W. Clarkson in command of the 33rd for the rest of the war.

The Division landed on the West Coast of Morotai Island on Dec. 18, 1944, without resistance. The division arrived in Lingayen Gulf and landed on Luzon Feb. 10, 1945. On Feb. 19, 1945, the division began its drive into the Caraballo Mountains toward its objective of Baguio, the summer capitol, and second largest city of the Philippines, and Japanese Headquarters.

Illinois Soldiers faced two enemies, the well-equipped Japanese force and the mountainous terrain. Bulldozers from the division's 108th Engineer Combat Battalion carved trails through the mountainous country to pave the way for the advancing infantry. The division seized Question Mark and Benchmark Hills after heavy fighting on Feb. 22, 1945.

The 130th Infantry, with the help of Filipino Guerrilla units attached to it, patrolled as front-line troops. Each suffered numerous casualties. The Filipinos possessed excellent fighting spirit and a strong desire to push the Japanese out of their homeland. Filipino carrying parties often helped get the wounded carried to



Soldiers from the 33rd Division on patrol in the Pacific Theater of Operations during World War II.

safety. They were a hardy people able to carry for long distances over the treacherous mountain trails without undue fatigue. They often received fire from the Japanese and had to put down the patient's stretcher to shoot back.

Beginning at a few feet above sea level, the Illinoisans fought and climbed over rocky ledges and towering peaks 5,000 feet high. Rays from the sun beat down on the foot Soldiers, and limited water supply caused many to suffer from heat exhaustion. After battling the entrenched Japanese in the hills, the 130th Infantry took Aringay and its bridge March 7, 1945, without opposition and went on the capture Mt. Magabang the following day.

The three Infantry Regiments of the division opened a three-prong attack against the Japanese. The 136th maintained pressure as it advanced along Kennon Road. The 123rd patrolled northeast of Pugo. Elements from the 130th joined a



Noncommissioned officers from the 33rd Division pause briefly from the war efforts.

division task force linked up with Filipino guerrillas of northern Luzon, but the Japanese had already withdrawn. The attached 129th Infantry (detached from the 33rd and attached to the 37th Division) pushed up Highway 9 toward Baguio and encountered very heavy fighting in the Slat area from March 23 to April 10, 1945. The 123rd Infantry took Mt. Calungong and pushed beyond Galiono on the Pugo-Baguio Trail. Division commanders used infantry-artillery combinations and made several bold attacks at night, taking key steel and concrete bridges intact and seized several important positions high in the mountains.

During the fight for Baguio, the 33rd Division artillery unearthed something shiny. Company C, 130th Infantry unearthed hidden Japanese treasure on the road to Rosario.

Led by 2nd Lt. Charles W. Holland, a patrol discovered a fortune in silver pesos of pre-war Philippine coins buried in a ditch. The fleeing Japanese stashed the money there in the hopes of retrieving it later. Ultimately it required six trucks to remove the confiscated money estimated at a half million dollars. The City of Baguio happily received it from the surprised Soldiers.

The 130th Infantry captured Asin on April 12, 1945, but further advance was halted by a Japanese tunnel complex nearby. Ground assault of the Asin Tunnels was suspended on April 15, 1945, while artillery bombardment softened up the stronghold.

The 130th renewed its attacks and resorted to reducing the tunnel lines one after the other in close combat. The Battle for Baguio ended on April 27, 1945, as both the 33rd and the 37th Infantry Division columns converged and overran the city. Relieved by the 32nd Infantry, the division was engaged in amphibious training in the Philippines when the war ended. The division arrived for occupation duties in Japan on Sept. 24, 1945 and inactivated there on Feb. 4, 1946.

The division suffered 396 killed in action, 2,024 wounded in action and an additional 128 passed away from their wounds. The 33rd Division fought hard and liberated thousands of citizens of Northern Luzon and Baguio. Three Medals of Honor were earned for bravery. The division earned two campaign streamers for New Guinea and Luzon, a Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Pacific Theatre 1944-1945, Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Pacific Theatre 1945, and Philippine Presidential Unit Citation, Oct. 17, 1945, to July 4, 1945.



On the lookout for Japanese snipers, a patrol of the 130th Infantry Regiment, 33rd Division, moves up Sessions Road in Baguio, Luzon, past the ruins of a market place on April 27, 1945. Photo courtesy of National Archives.



The 100,000th round fired at Japanese on Luzon, Philippines, 1945. Photo by Henry van Westrop, 33rd Division photographer.

‘MOBILIZING FOR THE STORM’



Col. Harold Keistler, commander of the 1712th Air Refueling Wing (Provisional), speaks to personnel in Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield in early 1991. Many 126th Air Refueling Wing members, including Col. Keistler the 126th commander, and aircraft were deployed in support of the operation.

1,400 Illinois Guardsmen activated for Persian Gulf War

On Aug. 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. President George H. W. Bush quickly announced that the United States found Iraq’s actions unacceptable.

On Aug. 7, the president issued a military response called Operation Desert Shield. The United States, together with 34 other nations organized a coalition to defend Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait.

Operation Desert Shield transitioned to Operation Desert Storm on Jan. 17, 1991with the start of the Aerial bombing campaign against Iraq and ended with the American -led Liberation of Kuwait on Feb. 28.

The Illinois National Guard answered the call with 11 units and 1,400 Guardsmen.

Three transportation units, the 1244th from Cairo, the 1544th from Paris and the 1644th out of Rock Falls all served in Saudi Arabia. The 1244th had the responsibility of nine tractor-trailer rigs, 14 trailers and 45 trucks that could carry 5 tons of equipment and people. The 1544th conducted transportation missions and moved supplies and people throughout the country, traveling more than 750,000 miles with no accidents.

The 933rd and 233rd Military Police Companies from Fort Sheridan and Springfield respectively both served but in different areas of the globe.

The 933rd performed law enforcement duties on eight different installations in Germany. The unit performed traffic control, security details, provided deterrence to possible terrorist activities as interior guard forces.

The 233rd processed and guarded prisoners of war in Saudi Arabia and performed security patrols when needed. They secured a helicopter crash site in the desert and assisted in humanitarian efforts with civilians. The unit encountered eight scud missile attacks with all taken out by American Patriot missiles. The Guardsmen worked under a system of alarms and sirens with strict protocols.

The Soldiers who bivouacked in the desert had challenging living conditions. Sand got everywhere and in everything wreaking havoc on any object containing moving parts. Equipment suffered from more wear and tear than usual requiring additional maintenance. The Arabian winter was cold and wet. Soldiers learned to adapt and overcome, sometimes doing without hot water, flushing toilets or telephone access. High winds destroyed tents and carried away unsecured objects.

The 108th Medical Battalion from Chicago had command and control of Soldiers from other states' Guards, U.S. Army Reserve and active U.S. Army units. They provided emergency resuscitative care and battlefield evacuation in the Persian Gulf operation in direct support of the U.S. Army's 7th Corps and the 18th Airborne Corps.

The 108th served and supported 22,462 U.S. service personnel, 54,407 enemy Prisoners of War, and 3,100 civilians. Their ground ambulance operation transported 3,883 casualties more than 283,781 miles.

Helicopters flew 249 missions for a total of 1,316 flight hours. The 108th personnel landed in Dhaharan, Saudi Arabia, and then moved inland to a base camp in King Khalid Military City.

When Kuwait City was liberated, the unit dispatched a command-and-control element to provide medical services for Kuwait City 72 hours after cessation of hostilities. Illinois Army National Guard aviation assets from Decatur also served in Saudi Arabia.



The 108th Medical Battalion from Chicago provided emergency resuscitative care and battlefield evacuation in the Persian Gulf operation in direct support of the U.S. Army's 7th Corps and 18th Airborne Corps. They were among 1,400 Soldiers and Airmen of the Illinois National Guard activated for service in 1990-1991.

Airmen from the 126th Air Refueling Wing, the 108th Air Refueling Squadron and sub-elements of the 126th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron all served in Saudi Arabia.

Loaded Illinois Air National Guard KC-135s from the 126th Air Refueling Wing flew in a specified flight pattern over Saudi Arabia. Upon arrival at the rendezvous point, the tankers would normally fuel four to sixteen fighters. Sometimes the tanker stayed in the flight pattern and provided post-strike refueling. The entire mission lasted six to eight hours.

Most of the Illinois National Guard units served for 90 days up to nine months of duty. All Illinois National Guardsmen returned home safe to their friends and families.

At its peak, 600,000 U.S. personnel served during the Persian Gulf War.



233rd Military Police Company, based in Springfield, during the unit's Welcome Home from their Desert Storm deployment.



The Illinois National Guard has been activated over the years for a variety of State Active Duty missions, including the more than 1,000 Illinois Army and Air National Guard members who deployed to the southern United States in support of hurricane relief efforts in 2005.

Illinois National Guard activates for variety of State Active Duty missions

From the Pullman Strike of 1894 in Chicago that spread to 27 states and affected 250,000 workers, to the 1968 Democratic Conventions and riots resulting from the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Illinois National Guard has proudly defended and protected the citizens of the state.

Sometimes the call extends to other states in the nation.

In 2005, over 1,000 Illinois Army and Air National Guard members deployed to our southern states in support of relief efforts for hurricanes Katrina, Rita and later in 2011, Irene.

In 2011, Illinois National Guard troops assisted the Illinois State Police during the severe winter storms in February and helped communities in southern Illinois during the floods in May.

In 2012, approximately 1,400 Soldiers and Airmen supported the NATO Summit in Chicago.

The 182nd Air Wing provided support to the state of Texas during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 evacuating more than 60 adults, 20 children, four disabled adults and 3,000 pounds of personal belongings. They also delivered more than 7,500 pounds of relief supplies and equipment.





The Prairie Sentinel
1301 North MacArthur Boulevard
Springfield, Illinois 62702

DSN: 555-3569
Phone: (217) 761-3569
Fax: (217) 761-2988

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