

GUARDLIFE

JULY - DECEMBER 2024



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Above: U.S. Army Soldiers from Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve forces participate in live-fire battle drills during the 254th Regiment (Combat Arms) Infantry Advanced Leaders Course at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, July 25, 2024. Advanced Leaders Course is a branch-specific course that provides Soldiers selected for promotion to Staff Sgt. an opportunity to enhance leadership, technical skill, tactical expertise, and experience needed to lead squad-size units. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

Cover: U.S. Army Soldiers with Bravo Battery, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, conduct a live-fire exercise utilizing the M119 howitzer, in Iraq, May 28, 2024. The exercise was conducted in order to maintain proficiency and readiness in support of the Combined Joint Task Force- Operation Inherent Resolve mission. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Bruce Daddis)

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GUARDLIFE is published by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Public Affairs Office for all members of the New Jersey Army and Air National Guard, their families, retirees, and civilian employees. The views and opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Department of Defense, the Army, the Air Force, or the National Guard Bureau. Letters may be sent to: Guardlife, Public Affairs Office, P.O. Box 340, NJDMAVA, Trenton, NJ, 08625-0340. E-mail at: pao@dmava.nj.gov

Always Ready, Always There

By Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey



U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, addresses Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, in the passenger terminal at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Nov. 27, 2024. The 161 Soldiers are the first wave of the 1,500 Soldiers – the largest

deployment of New Jersey Army National Guard Soldiers since 2008 – who deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve to return home in time for the holidays. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)

In peacetime and wartime, the New Jersey National Guard is always ready, always there. Today we continue that mission, and our noble work, as the United States faces challenges both at home and in the larger world. Moments like today’s review give us, as they did for the generations that preceded us, cause to reflect upon our achievements and assess our place in a global security environment of persistent change and challenge.

There has never been in a time in history when the United States has asked more of our Armed Forces, especially the Citizen Soldiers and Airmen who make up the roughly 8,400 member New Jersey National Guard. That’s not hyperbole. This is our highest operational tempo since World War II.

Right now, the sun is rising over the desert as the Soldiers of the 508th Military Police Company and Charlie Company, 224th Security and Support Battalion, are entering the final days of a nearly year-long deployment to protect America’s Southwest border.

Right now, the sun is about to set in Kosovo where Soldiers of Detachment 2, Charlie Company, 171st General Support Aviation Battalion, stand ready on the flight line to provide MEDEVAC support to NATO’s ongoing peacekeeping mission in the Western Balkans.

And it’s already night in the Middle East, where Soldiers of our 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team are arrayed throughout the U.S. Central Command Area of Operations in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. This, the largest deployment of New Jersey National Guard forces since 2008, represents a critical line of effort as we work to ensure a safe and secure environment for the United States and our regional partners in what we all know to be one of the most dangerous corners of the world.

And if you will allow me a personal point of pride as only the third Air Force officer to serve as Adjutant General in our 248-year history:

the Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard continue to fly, fight, and win, delivering airpower and support to our active duty counterparts anytime, anywhere. Over the last twelve months, the 108th Wing successfully integrated with European and NATO partners during the Copper Arrow exercise. In addition, the 177th Fighter Wing employed the new XAB fighting construct, flying over 2,300 hours and 407 sorties with nine partner nations over a period of three months.

Today, and every day that our battle buddies and wingmen are deployed forward, I know that I speak for all of us when I say to their spouses, their families, and their loved ones, you remain in our prayers and in our thoughts and on behalf of our big New Jersey family, we also thank you for your service.

To each New Jersey Citizen-Soldier and Airman, I wish to acknowledge that the crucible of overseas and domestic operations has tested our Guard’s capabilities and resilience like never before. Your incredible level of dedication and expertise has shown through every mission.

Whether through the success of this summer’s Vigilant Guard exercise that tested our ability to jointly work with local, state, and federal agencies to respond to a natural disaster, or through the 62 engagements conducted in the last training year alone with our state partners the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Cyprus, you have earned the respect and admiration of those that we serve alongside as well as the public who we are privileged to serve.

In short, your achievements are extraordinary; the selfless service and dedication to duty you continue to display ensures the security of our fellow citizens and the defense of democracy in the larger world.

Our work continues. I firmly believe that by challenging ourselves and our units to do better and aim higher, we can bear any burden and achieve any task.

ON PATROL

A U.S. Army Soldier with the 1st Squadron, 102nd Cavalry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, scans the landscape during convoy operations to move personnel, equipment, and supplies, in Eastern Syria. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Bruce Daddis)



U.S. Army Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected All-Terrain Vehicles crewed by Soldiers with the 1st Squadron, 102nd Cavalry Regiment, wind their way through eastern Syria in support of

Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve. (U.S. Army photos by Staff Sgt. Bruce Daddis)



3-112th leads artillery course

Story and photos by Staff Sgt. Bruce Daddis, Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve

A U.S. Army Soldier with the 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, demonstrates an M2A2 Aiming Circle to soldiers

from the Iraqi Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade, during the Task Force Redleg Artillery Course in western Iraq, July 29, 2024.

Advise, assist, and enable, a key component of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve's mission to enhance partner capacity in Iraq, was on full display at the Task Force Redleg Artillery Course in western Iraq, July 14 - Aug. 1.

During this time, the New Jersey Army National Guard's 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, serving as Task Force Redleg, hosted their Iraqi counterparts for an exchange of ideas as they worked side by side during the artillery course.

The training has become a part of the task force's deployment rotations in recent years. It was last organized in December 2023 by the 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery Regiment, 10th Mountain Division. Picking up where the 15th left off, the New Jersey Guardsmen collaborated with leadership from Military Advisor Group - Iraq and the Iraqi Armed Forces to ensure another successful course.

The course consisted of 32 Iraqi soldiers from the Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade and 38 field artillerymen from Task Force Redleg. The 112th provided the advisors, instructional regimen, supplies, equipment, and the training areas. The training included classroom

instruction, hands-on practical training, weapons maintenance, and culminated with a live fire exercise.

A primary focus of the course was to exchange best practices of all elements of field artillery: calling for fire, securing and operating a command post, gun line operations, map reading, land navigation, terrain sketching, and radio communications.

The subject matter covered during the course contained the equivalent of what the Iraqi Artillery School covers in six months, according to Iraqi Armed Forces Capt. Dhiyaa Husseie Majeed Dayhood. "The U.S. military is a very advanced military, and it was a good experience for us, and they were very generous with information. They took the time to answer all the questions we asked," he said.

However, what evolved between the training partners transcended the subject matter of the course: mutual respect and friendship.

"Our first impression was this is going to be extremely difficult because of the language barrier, but we easily overcame that with help from our linguists," said Staff Sgt. Tyler Simmons, platoon sergeant, Bravo Battery. "As the training event unfolded, and progressed, we

"This was a first-time experience for the majority of us, and we believe we gained more knowledge throughout our time working with them."

**STAFF SGT. TYLER SIMMONS
PLATOON SERGEANT, BRAVO BATTERY
3RD BATTALION, 112TH FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT**

“WHAT THIS TRAINING REALLY SHOWED IS THAT BY WORKING THROUGH MUTUAL COOPERATION, WE CAN DEFEAT ISIS TOGETHER.”

**CAPT. DHIYAA HUSSEIE MAJEED
DAYHOOD
IRAQI ARMED FORCES**

saw better communication between our Soldiers. Everyone became more engaged and enjoyed laughs with one another. This was a first-time experience for the majority of us, and we believe we gained more knowledge throughout our time working with them.”

Dayhood shared the same sentiment: “I wish we had more time to spend with each other on these exercises, because I felt we were really benefiting from this experience of working together. What this training



Above: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Andre R. Debrito, section chief, Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, works with soldiers from the Iraqi Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade, during a classroom exercise in western Iraq, July 30, 2024. Below left: U.S. Army Soldiers with the 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, and soldiers with the Iraqi Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade, perform a live fire exercise in western Iraq, July 31, 2024.



really showed is that by working through mutual cooperation, we can defeat ISIS together.”

Once the instructional period ended, it was time to put their learning to the test. The partner forces worked together to perform a live fire exercise utilizing the M119 Howitzer to demonstrate their proficiency, readiness, and interoperability.

After a successful exercise, the class attended a graduation ceremony and received certificates for the successful completion of the training.

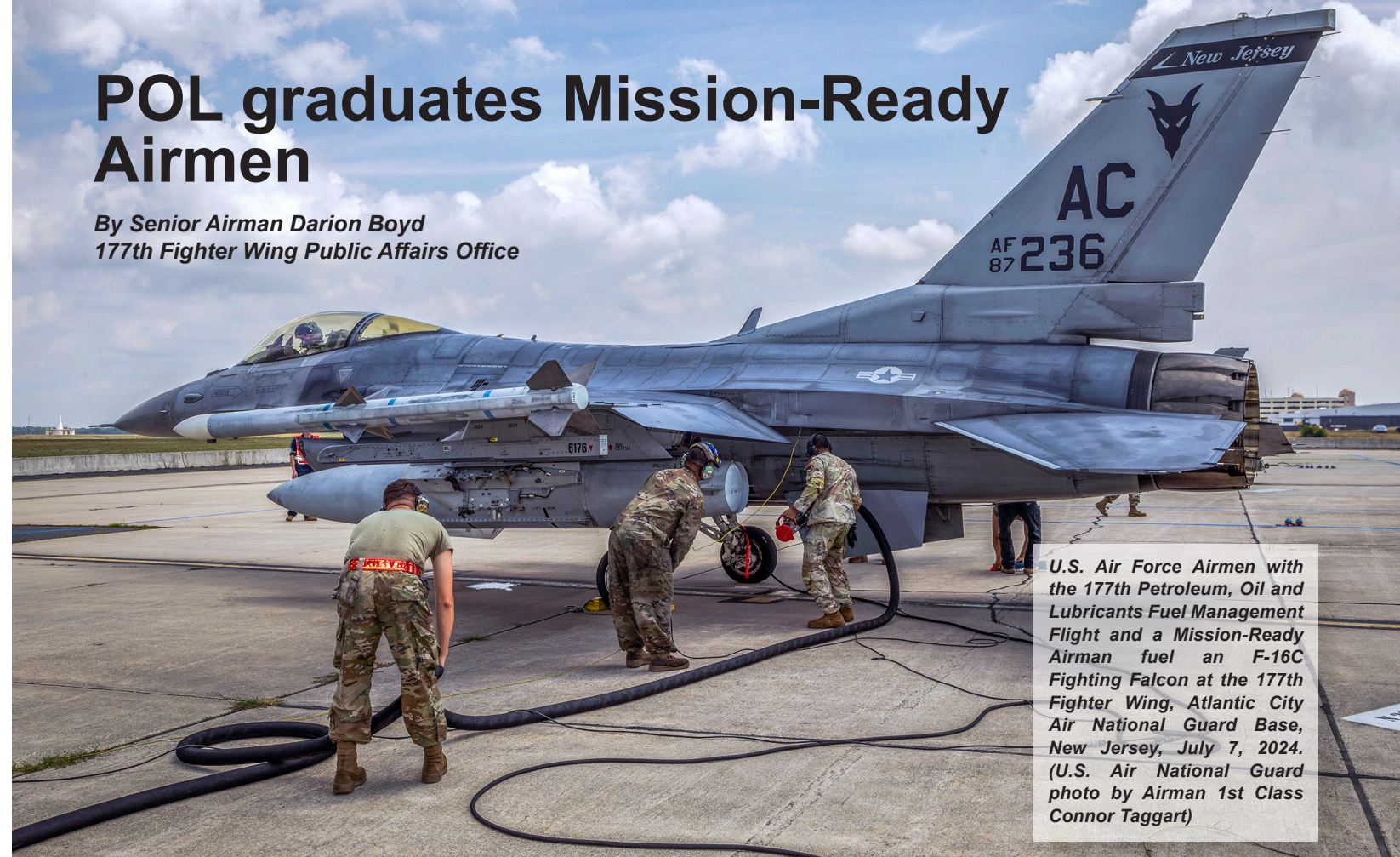
U.S. Army Lt. Col. David Eckenrode, commander, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, applauded the Iraqi soldiers: “We really appreciated their dedication and willingness to learn. They were clearly invested in this training. When they go back and share this knowledge with their fellow Soldiers, they are enabling their units and developing new capabilities to utilize on the battlefield. These new capabilities will give their battalion or battery overmatch against any enemy, to include Da’esh (ISIS) and ensure that they never regenerate to threaten their country.”



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, and Iraqi Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade soldiers have their photo taken after completing the Task Force Redleg Artillery Course in western Iraq, Aug. 1, 2024.

POL graduates Mission-Ready Airmen

**By Senior Airman Darion Boyd
177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office**



U.S. Air Force Airmen with the 177th Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants Fuel Management Flight and a Mission-Ready Airman fuel an F-16C Fighting Falcon at the 177th Fighter Wing, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, July 7, 2024. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Connor Taggart)

The 177th Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants Fuel Management Flight graduated it's latest class of Mission-Ready Airmen Aug. 8, 2024.

The training was held from July through August 2024 at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey.

The MRA initiative improves the Air Force's flexibility by ensuring Airmen from various career fields are trained in multiple skill sets, such as R-11 refueler operation and maintenance; cryogenic operations, fuels laboratory operations, and basic fuel service center operations.

“MRA supports the 177th Fighter Wing mission by enhancing versatility, team efficiency, and mission readiness through Airmen that are capable of performing multiple roles,” said Senior Master Sgt. Misty Capanas, fuels superintendent, 177th Logistics Readiness Squadron, 177th Fighter Wing. “This MRA class was a major success, and we couldn't be prouder of our Airmen.”

The 177th Fighter Wing gains skilled, multifaceted Airmen to

routinely contribute dominant airpower.

“The goal of the class is to equip Airmen with the knowledge and practical skills related to servicing aircraft,” said Tech. Sgt. Charles Zingrone, section chief, 177th Fuels Operations. “Our career field ensures fuel is consistently available for aircraft to keep the mission going. It gives us a sense of pride to provide Airmen with the knowledge and hands-on training they can effectively utilize in deployed environments.”

The MRA program was designed with rigorous, yet achievable goals to give Airmen a foundational understanding of the fuels management career field. The 177th POL team hopes to evolve and expand this MRA program for future iterations.

“We hope to use this as a pilot program for other wings to develop a larger pool of mission-ready Airmen,” said Capanas. “These Airmen will be a mission-critical asset in future warfare.”



U.S. Air Force Airmen with the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, have their photo taken after completing the petroleum, oil and lubricants Multi-Capable Airman course at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, Aug. 8, 2024. The MCA training course takes Airmen from different career fields and trains them to become efficient in POL competencies such as R-11 operation maintenance, cryogenic operations, fuel laboratory operations and basic fuel service center operations. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Andrew Relyea)

Soldier fulfills father’s wish to find a better life

Story and photo by
Spc. Seth Cohen
New Jersey National Guard
Recruiting & Retention
Battalion



When U.S. Army Spc. Bea Lujan was growing up in the city of Tarifa, Spain, she always remembered how her father wanted her to have a better life. A life he felt that could be better achieved in the United States rather than their home country.

Lujan got a taste of that life in her early teens. At 13 years old, Lujan spent a year in Missouri for a study program. That year left a profound impact on her, fueling a desire to return that only grew stronger with time.

“I knew I would come back,” said Lujan.

After graduating high school, Lujan decided to attend college in the United States.

“I didn’t know exactly where I would go, and I was still struggling because college in the U.S. is expensive.”

The burden of tuition weighed heavily on Lujan’s family, but despite this, her father supported her ambition.

“My education could have been free in Spain, but I knew that this is what I wanted,” said Lujan.

She pursued college in the United States – not just to find where she belonged, but to immerse herself in her passion: media, graphic design, and digital art.

“I’ve always been into art, so I decided to pursue a degree in that field”, said Lujan. “I found a school in Orlando, Florida – Full Sail University. That’s where I decided to do my bachelor’s in science, digital arts, and graphic design.”

After obtaining her degree with a near perfect GPA, Lujan returned to Spain where she applied those skills at a local television studio. She spent several years as a digital arts specialist with the studio. She was fully

immersed in her passion animating graphics and text for news broadcasts.

Despite the stable life she had built while thriving in her field, wanderlust gradually took hold, guiding her toward a new outlook – a permanent return to the United States.

After much deliberation, Lujan found a sponsor and decided to make her third – and final – trip to the United States.

“I didn’t know where to go or what to do, but I knew I wanted to do this,” said Lujan.

Despite her qualifications, she ended up working as a waitress in New Jersey. In an ironic twist, her lack of American citizenship prevented her from pursuing the passions she had refined in Orlando.

“Everyone has their goals and desires, everyone has their time,” said Lujan. “I knew I needed to move here no matter what.”

It was during this transitional period that she considered the idea of military service.

“I would always joke with my family about joining the Army, but I was never serious,” said Lujan. “I know it sounds crazy – my family thought so at least – but one day I literally woke up and knew I had to join the Army. I needed to do something with my life. I’m 26 and I am not getting any younger.”

This decision proved pivotal for Lujan. She researched each branch of service and ultimately chose the New Jersey Army National Guard following a conversation with the U.S. Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Miguel Valoy, a Recruiting and Retention noncommissioned officer.

“Staff Sgt. Valoy did everything he could to make sure I got in, he made sure it was easy and seamless for me,” said Lujan. “Nothing

comes easy, nothing is free in the military, but he made sure I could get in.”

Weeks passed, and Lujan’s determination remained steadfast.

Then her father passed away.

Her father’s comment, “Don’t come back, because if you do, you won’t leave again,” spoken during one of their last conversations, filled her with a sense of urgency.

Two months after her father’s death, Lujan received her permanent residency card, commonly known as a green card.

“My dad asked me, ‘In Spain you have a comfortable life, but there’s nowhere to go after this.’ I wanted more, and so did my dad,” said Lujan.

Reflecting on her reasons for coming, Lujan understood that the United States had so much to offer, it meant much more to her than just a good life. To Lujan, it represented her destined path. Shortly after she enlisted, she achieved her citizenship with Valoy’s help. What would normally take months was accomplished in just two weeks for a determined person who longed to serve.

“I don’t regret it, I had to join the Army and become an American citizen because that was my dad’s last wish,” said Lujan.

Lujan enlisted in the New Jersey Army National Guard as a petroleum specialist. She is currently awaiting her ship date to Basic Combat Training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina.

21st WMD-CST passes Army North evaluation

Photos by Mark C. Olsen
New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mauricio Caceres, survey team member with the 21st Weapons of Mass Destruction-Civil Support Team, New Jersey National Guard, decontaminates simulated evidence during an Army North-mandated training proficiency evaluation at the New Jersey Air Victory Museum on Lumberton, New Jersey, Aug. 6, 2024. The 21st WMD-CST identifies chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear substances; assess and advises civil authorities on response measures to man-made or natural disasters.



Above: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Christopher R. Wall, survey team member, 21st WMD-CST adjusts his breathing apparatus at the New Jersey Air Victory Museum in Lumberton, New Jersey, Aug. 6, 2024. Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. William Liu, left,

survey team member, 24th WMD-CST, New York National Guard, assists Staff Sgt. Christopher M. Mejia, survey team member, 21st WMD-CST, into his Level A Protective Suit in Lumberton, New Jersey, Aug. 6, 2024



Above: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Christopher M. Mejia, left, holds open the door while Staff Sgt. Christopher R. Wall, both survey team members with the 21st WMD-CST, employs detection equipment before entering a simulated crime scene at the New Jersey Air

Victory Museum in Lumberton, Aug. 6, 2024. Below: U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mauricio Caceres, right, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Alex J. Potts, both 21st WMD-CST survey team members with, investigate a simulated crime scene, Aug. 6, 2024.





Above: U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Jesus I. Delacruz, left, checks Sgt. 1st Class Leonardo Betancur, decontamination team member, both with the 21st WMD-CST, for simulated contamination at the New Jersey Air Victory Museum, Aug. 6, 2024.

Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Christopher R. Wall, survey team member, 21st WMD-CST, uses a handheld chemical identification analyzer at a simulated crime scene at the Flying W Airport in Medford, New Jersey, Aug. 8, 2024.



Above: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. William Liu, left, 24th WMD-CST, New York National Guard, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Alex J. Potts, right, assists Sgt. Eric J. Boyer, both 21st WMD-CST survey team members, in donning his Level A Protective Suit at the Flying W

Airport, Aug. 8, 2024. Below: U.S. Army Sgt. Eric J. Boyer, left, places a sample into a container held by Staff Sgt. Christopher M. Mejia, both 21st WMD-CST survey team members, at a simulated crime scene at the Flying W Airport, Aug. 8, 2024.



VIGILANT GUARD TESTS NJNG'S READINESS

By SPC. MICHAEL HAYES, 444TH MOBILE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DETACHMENT

The New Jersey National Guard launched Vigilant Guard Aug. 17, a disaster-preparedness exercise running from Aug. 17-21 to enhance coordination between military first responders and civilian emergency services. The exercise simulates a Category 3 hurricane striking New Jersey; testing responses to massive flooding, power outages, and significant damage to bridges and a major hospital.

“We are training for the worst-case scenario,” said U.S. Army Col. Arthur Roscoe, incoming Director of the Joint Staff, New Jersey National Guard. “A Category 3 storm is unlikely, but having lived through Superstorm Sandy, we know even non-hurricane storms can cause catastrophic damage.”

When disasters exceed local capabilities, the National Guard Joint Operation Center coordinates with the state’s Office of Emergency Management to respond as military first responders.

“In New Jersey, emergency management begins locally and escalates to county and state levels. If additional support is needed, OEM will call on us,” said U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Timothy Coakley, Director of the Joint Staff, New Jersey National Guard.

Throughout Vigilant Guard, U.S. Northern Command assessed New Jersey’s mission readiness and provide feedback. Each state participates in its own geographically tailored Vigilant Guard exercise, addressing disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and wildfires to prepare troops for likely scenarios.

The Somerset-based 42nd Regional Support Group followed civil authorities’ directions, conducting search-and-rescue missions at a collapsed hospital, and combating cyber-attacks. Within the exercise’s context, any tasks beyond the New Jersey Guard’s capacity will be notionally assigned to other states, including Massachusetts and Maryland.

“My focus for this exercise is on people, places, and processes,” said Coakley. “We need to ensure we have the right personnel in place, a functioning command post, and a refined joint planning process.”

Extended disaster assistance begins with a Presidential Disaster Declaration, enabling federal funds to relieve state resources. During significant disasters, a National Guard senior leader often serves as a “dual-status commander,” leading both federal and state forces.

In this exercise, Coakley assumed that role.

Coakley said the 42nd RSG – the primary unit conducting the exercise – has the combat sustainment support elements necessary to respond to a major disaster.

The 42nd brings real-world experience, having responded to major disasters across the country. “We’re an enduring force,



U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Preston Robinson, with the Joint Staff - Joint Force Headquarters, New Jersey National Guard, briefs the staff during the Vigilant Guard training exercise at the Homeland Security Center for Excellence in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Aug. 18, 2024. Vigilant Guard is a full-scale exercise designed to ensure effective coordination between local, state, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and federal partners. Participants will practice synchronizing emergency responses with regional assets to assess existing emergency plans. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

ready to assist the moment the storms pass,” said Capt. Jeffery Silver, the project officer for the Vigilant Guard exercise.

In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy caused more than 40 deaths and more than \$37 billion in damage, more than 6,000 New Jersey National Guardsmen assisted civil authorities in the response and some remained on duty through months of cleanup.

New Jersey has also supported other states, including sending more than 100 Guardsmen to assist Florida after Hurricane Irma hit in 2017.

Roscoe emphasized that participation in Vigilant Guard ensures the New Jersey National Guard is storm-

ready. “Our staff will be more confident in responding to state OEM requests and better understand our capabilities and growth areas,” said Roscoe.

“We’re an enduring force, ready to assist the moment the storms pass.”

**CAPT. JEFFERY SILVER
VIGILANT GUARD PROJECT OFFICER**

VIGILANT GUARD 24-NJ

PHOTOS BY MARK C. OLSEN
NEW JERSEY NATIONAL GUARD AFFAIRS OFFICE



A U.S. Army Soldier with the 328th Military Police Company, New Jersey Army National Guard, has his Level C suit checked during Vigilant Guard 24 – NJ at the New Jersey Task Force 1 Training Facility at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Aug. 20, 2024. Vigilant Guard is an interagency emergency preparedness exercise which evaluates and enhances the integration of local, state, and federal responders while improving coordination for relief efforts, response and recovery management plans, and operational relationships.



Above: U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Johnathan N. Ramos, a firefighter with the 177th fighter Wing Civil Engineer Squadron, New Jersey Air National Guard, connects a hose to fill a water bladder at the New Jersey Task Force 1 Training Facility at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Aug. 20, 2024.

Below: New Jersey National Guard leadership; U.S. Northern Command; North American Aerospace Defense Command; Federal Emergency Management Agency; New Jersey State Police, and the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness observe Vigilant Guard 24 – NJ operations Aug. 20, 2024.



Above: U.S. Army National Guard Soldiers with the Massachusetts Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Task Force rescue a simulated casualty during Vigilant Guard 24 – NJ at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Aug. 20, 2024.

Below: U.S. Army National Guard Soldiers with the Massachusetts CBRN Task Force decontaminate a simulated casualty at the New Jersey Task Force 1 Training Facility at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Aug. 20, 2024.



CALL FOR FIRE



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, perform an indirect fire training exercise in eastern Syria, Sept. 3, 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Kyle Marr)

Building dedicated in honor of Brig. Gen. Dutko

By Tech. Sgt. Anna-kay Ellis, 108th Wing Public Affairs Office

A dedication ceremony was held at the 108th Wing, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Sept. 14, 2024, renaming the Mission Generation Complex in honor of retired Brig. Gen. Robert S. Dutko Sr.

The event was attended by state and community leaders, veterans, military retirees, family members, and 108th Wing Airmen, all of whom gathered to celebrate the official renaming of building 3369. The newly dedicated facility will continue to serve as the central hub for the 108th Logistics and Readiness Squadron.

The ceremony commemorated Dutko's distinguished service and enduring legacy within the 108th Wing and the New Jersey Air National Guard.

"We are here to witness a rare event for an exceptional human being," said Col. Lola D. Washington, 108th Mission Support Group commander. "You are responsible for the design of building 3369, as well as the oversight of its construction where you once served as the commander. Therefore, it's only fitting that your name be memorialized on this building."

Construction of building 3369 was completed in 1989 as part of a comprehensive infrastructure project to upgrade the 108th Wings logistics capabilities as it transitioned from the F-4E Phantom IIs to the KC-135E Stratotankers. Dutko's commitment to creating a lasting legacy for his fellow Airmen was unwavering.

"I believe the people were happy with what I gave them," said Dutko. "It was all for them. It was designed for the future, and I'm so pleased that 30 something years later it is still a great functional area with changes to it all for the better."

The dedication ceremony included the unveiling of a commemorative plaque and building sign bearing Dutko's name. The plaque, prominently displayed at the building's entrance, outlines his 42 years of service to the New Jersey Air National Guard.

Members of Dutko's family were present to witness the dedication and received a framed collage depicting the construction, the plaque, and building signage. A memorial table was set up to honor his late wife, Barbara Ann Dutko, who was remembered for her unconditional support throughout his military career.

Dutko, a respected figure in the New Jersey Air National Guard, is known not only for his military accomplishments but also for his deep commitment to his fellow service members and the community. His current civic affiliations include the National Guard Association of the United States and of New Jersey; the Patriotic Committee of Ewing Township, and the New Jersey Air National Guard Historical Society are among the many organizations he supports.

"General Dutko is someone all our Airmen can and do look up to," said Col. Eric A. Guttormsem, 108th Wing commander. "Someone who has repeatedly stepped up when the moment needed a leader."

Building 3369 now stands not just as a facility for the deployment and distribution of materials and vehicle management but as a tribute to the values that General Dutko embodies— duty, service, and dedication to the mission and the people who carry it out.



Above: The grandchildren of retired Brig. Gen. Robert S. Dutko, left, unveil the commemorative plaque during the 108th Logistics and Readiness building dedication ceremony at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Sept. 14, 2024. The building was named in honor of Dutko, recognizing his 42-years of service and leadership within the New Jersey Air National Guard. Below: U.S. Air Force Col. Yvonne L. Mays, Acting Adjutant General of New Jersey, left, and New Jersey Assemblywoman Carol Murphy, right, present retired Brig. Gen. Robert S. Dutko with a proclamation during the dedication ceremony. (U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Emily Saxton)



177TH HOLDS CARE DAY

By Airman 1st Class Connor Taggart, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office

The 177th Fighter Wing held its annual Community Assessment and Resiliency Engagement Day at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, Sept. 27, 2024.

CARE Day aims to provide Airmen and their families with a wide range of services to promote morale, wellness, and readiness. This year's event is focused on academic, personal, and professional growth, with a variety of vendors and organizations ready to support the 177th community.

"The goal of CARE Day is to build a bridge between the 177th Fighter Wing and the broader community," said Robert Luurtsema, program manager, 177th Airmen and Family Readiness. "It's about supporting our Airmen and making sure they know the resources available to them both on and off base."

Jennifer Baldwin, 177th director of psychological health, and Luurtsema developed the first CARE Day in 2022. Since then, it has grown into a larger program encompassing several themes each year to meet the evolving needs of the Airmen.

**THIS YEAR'S
EVENT IS FOCUSED
ON ACADEMIC,
PERSONAL, AND
PROFESSIONAL
GROWTH, WITH A
VARIETY OF VENDORS
AND ORGANIZATIONS
READY TO SUPPORT
THE 177TH
COMMUNITY.**

"Recognizing the need for our members to have access to important programs that offer services and additional resources to benefit our members is where CARE Day started and it's evolved into what is now a day where our membership can see the resources in real-time and interact with community partners," said Baldwin.

There were many resources in attendance for CARE Day, one being the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization. Jonathan Hinker, New Jersey VFW senior vice commander, highlighted the VFW's commitment to ensuring service members have the support they need to be mission ready.

"We advocate for everybody," said Hinker. "We help with food security, rent—



From right, U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Keith Elliss Jr., 177th Maintenance Group Aerospace Ground Equipment mechanic, and Jack Peterson, Logistics Readiness Squadron hazmat pharmacy technician, get served food by Burt Salisbury, Chaplain – Army, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 12173, during Community Assessment and Resilience Engagement day at the 177th Fighter Wing, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, Sept. 27, 2024. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Connor Taggart)

anything someone needs to keep them mission-ready and going in a positive way to serve our country."

Project Refit focuses on supporting veterans and service members by providing spaces for veterans to decompress and share their experiences in a supportive environment. James Corbett, a representative of Project Refit, emphasized the importance of bringing veterans and Airmen together to connect and support each other.

"We're here today to meet men and women who may need some additional resources or maybe to decompress," said Corbett. "We want to show them that it's okay to feel pain and work through it, and that they have a community to support them."

CARE Day also featured local universities and community organizations offering educational resources for 177th Airmen. Attendees explored opportunities for continuing education and training, supporting both their personal and professional growth.

"We want CARE Day to keep growing and supporting our Airmen in every way possible," said Luurtsema. "Each year, we learn something new and find ways to make the event even better. The future of CARE Day is bright, and we're excited to continue this mission."



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Angelina Pollino, 177th Airmen and Family Readiness Transition Assistance Program noncommissioned officer, holds a puppy during Community Assessment and Resilience Engagement day at the 177th Fighter Wing, Sept. 27, 2024. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Andrew Relyea)

Military Review 2024



Above: View of the parade field during the 2024 New Jersey National Guard Military Review at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt, New Jersey, Oct. 6, 2024. The Military Review is a more than

130-year-old tradition that allows the governor as commander-in-chief to review the Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard. Below left: U.S. Army Soldiers with Joint Force Headquarters,

New Jersey Army National Guard, led by Maj. Julie Demitrack and 1st Sgt. Jaime Greeley, render honors during the 2024 NJNG Military Review. Below right: The New Jersey National Guard Color Guard,

led by State Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Leonard and State Command Chief Master Sgt. Wayne Miller, present the colors during the pass in review. (New Jersey National Guard photos by Mark C. Olsen)



NIGHT...



U.S. Army Soldiers with 2nd Platoon, Charlie Battery, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, perform a live fire exercise utilizing the M777 Howitzer in Northeast Syria, Oct. 11, 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Kyle Marr)

AND DAY



U.S. Army Soldiers with Charlie Battery, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, perform a live fire exercise utilizing the M777 Howitzer in Northeast Syria, Oct. 16, 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Kyle Marr)

Pegasus Dawn strengthens ACE capabilities

Photos and story by Senior Airman Darion Boyd, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office



The 119th Fighter Squadron, assigned to the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard, deployed to Aviano Air Base, Italy for Operation Pegasus Dawn, hosted by the 31st Fighter Wing, from Oct. 18-25, 2024.

Pegasus Dawn is an Agile Combat Employment training mission designed to support the 108th Wing’s transition from the KC-135 Stratotanker refueling aircraft to the newer KC-46 Pegasus model.

The central idea of ACE is the distribution and dispersal of units across multiple locations. This increases friendly forces’ survivability and flexibility while complicating the adversary’s targeting process.

“The 119th is very familiar with ACE,” said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Michael Long, 119th Fighter Squadron commander. “During our recent combat deployment, we executed an unplanned ACE mission on short notice. It showed me that we can operate from the smallest footprint possible for a finite period.”

The 108th Wing gained valuable experience with the three KC-46 refuelers deployed to Air Force European Command, while integrating them into their preexisting systems and areas of responsibility.

The 119th pilots conducted daily flight missions, providing relevant ACE experience for the new tankers.

“Primarily, we are their receivers to ensure the basic systems to conduct aerial refueling are operational,” said U.S. Air Force Maj. Timothy R. Mann, project officer, 119th Fighter Squadron. “We received fuel from them on the trans-Atlantic flight and we are conducting aerial refueling with them each day of this deployment. We are executing a mixture of offensive counter-air and defensive counter-air missions with the 108th Wing and additional F-16s from the 555th Fighter Squadron.”

The 177th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron took this opportunity to further sharpen their ACE capabilities as well.

“To sustain combat operations, we absolutely need the maintenance and support teams,” said Long. “During Pegasus Dawn, we’re looking at an ACE mission from a slightly different approach – bringing our maintenance and support teams with the mentality of a minimalist both in personnel numbers and equipment.”

The Maintenance Squadron, while servicing the F-16 fighter jets and further supporting the mission, has also seen significant ACE success.

“Some of our major achievements have been our Airmen performing maintenance activities outside of their typical Air Force Specialty Code,” said Lt. Col. Jessica Lewis, 177th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron commander. “We had structural shop Airmen assisting with replacing liquid oxygen and marshaling jets; we had engine shop Airmen assisting with tire changes. We are all one team, and we work better together.”

Lewis emphasizes how the ACE concept plays a role on her teams.

“ACE is a smaller footprint contingency,” said Lewis. “Performing aircraft maintenance with a smaller footprint increases our stealth and flexibility for the fight to come.”

By utilizing ACE techniques, air units can accomplish more with less resources.

“This week’s partnership proves that the flying units of the NJANG can operate almost autonomously,” said Mann. “It shows that our state and its Airmen can organically deploy personnel, equipment, and airpower around the world with little to no outside support.”

The 177th Fighter Wing and the 119th Fighter Squadron hope to conduct ACE exercise missions in the future, developing them into effective and sustainable readiness practices.

“ACE is truly a mindset, and I am incredibly proud of what the Jersey Devil teams have done at Aviano,” said Long.



Above: U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Sabrina Hyde, tactical aircraft maintainer, 177th Maintenance Squadron, instructs Tech. Sgt. Rocco Lazaro on how to replace a tire on an F-16C Fighting Falcon with the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, at Aviano Air Base, Italy, Oct. 21, 2024.

Below: U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Gerad Villaluna, an aerospace propulsion mechanic with the 177th Maintenance Squadron, performs routine pre-flight inspections on a 177th F-16C Fighting Falcon at Aviano Air Base, Oct. 21, 2024.



Foot patrol

Photos by Capt. Kyle Marr
Combined Joint Task Force -
Operation Inherent Resolve



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, conduct security operations in cooperation with Syrian Democratic Forces in Northeast Syria, Oct. 24-25, 2024. Security operations such as foot patrols provide stability for the local populations and prevent a resurgence of ISIS in the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve area of responsibility.



Above: U.S. Army Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, conduct a foot patrol with Syrian Democratic Forces in northeast Syria, Oct. 24, 2024.

Below: A U.S. Army Soldier and Syrian Democratic Force soldier talk with children in northeast Syria, Oct. 24, 2024.





A U.S. Army Soldier sniper with the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, peers through a M2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle while conducting security operations with Syrian Democratic Forces members in northeast Syria, Oct. 24, 2024.



Above: U.S. Army Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, cross a field while on foot patrol in northeast Syria, Oct. 24, 2024.

Below: A U.S. Army Soldier sniper with the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, peers through a M2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle provides cover while on patrol with Syrian Democratic Forces.



Mentoring program empowers Airmen

By Tech Sgt. Anna-kay Ellis, 108th Wing Public Affairs Office

U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Marcie Montalvo, left, 108th Mission Support Group senior enlisted leader and Master Sgt. Christie Smith, Joint Force Headquarters executive administration assistant, have their photo taken at an award ceremony held at JFHQ, Joint

Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, Oct. 30, 2024. Smith was recognized as the New Jersey Air National Outstanding Senior Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. (Courtesy photo)

The 108th Mentoring Program held a Speed Networking Event Nov. 2, 2024, at the 108th Wing Heritage Center.

Mentorship offers an invaluable resource for Airmen seeking career guidance, strengthening foundational competencies, and expanding skill development. Studies even suggest that mentored individuals are 130 percent more likely to advance into leadership roles than those without mentorship.

"Our mentoring program is committed to fostering opportunities for building strong, impactful relationships," said Senior Master Sgt. Luis Mendoza, 108th Wing human resources advisor. "Mentorship is a reciprocal, collaborative process focused on the right match between mentor and mentee, allowing members to reach their full potential."

The program enables Airmen of all ranks to connect and participate as mentors, mentees, or both.

Through the program, Chief Master Sgt. Marcie Montalvo,

108th Mission Support Group senior enlisted leader and Master Sgt. Christie Smith, executive administration assistant, Joint Force

Headquarters, have developed a meaningful mentor-mentee bond.

"The mentorship program has been incredibly valuable for the 108th Wing and me personally," said Smith. "The guidance and support I've received from Montalvo have been pivotal in my career decisions and growth."

Smith credits the program with helping her evolve both personally and professionally.

"I am grateful to have a mentor of her caliber helping me navigate the opportunities I encounter," said Smith.

"As a co-founder of the program, I am passionate about giving back to our Airmen by sharing our knowledge and experiences

in hopes of inspiring others," said Montalvo. "Without mentors – be they family, colleagues, supervisors, or coaches – none of us would be where we are today."

"As a co-founder of the program, I am passionate about giving back to our Airmen."

**CHIEF MASTER SGT. MARCIE MONTALVO
SENIOR ENLISTED LEADER
108TH MISSION SUPPORT GROUP**

HALFTIME SHOW

PHOTOS BY SGT. MICHAEL SCHWENK
NEW JERSEY NATIONAL GUARD PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Jake E. McDonnell a bugler with the 63rd Army Band, New Jersey Army National Guard, performs Taps during halftime show at the Rutgers University's military appreciation game at SHI Stadium in Piscataway, New Jersey, Nov. 9, 2024.



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 63rd Army Band, New Jersey Army National Guard, perform during the halftime show at the

Rutgers University's military appreciation game at SHI Stadium in Piscataway, New Jersey, Nov. 9, 2024.



NJNG and Cyprus exchange best practices

Story and photos by Capt. Tyshawn Jenkins
177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Michele Lat, command and control operator, Command Post, 177 Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, addresses Republic of Cyprus National Guard members during training at Camp Panteli Katelari, Cyprus, Nov. 21, 2024. The Republic of Cyprus National Guard and the NJNG collaborated on noncommissioned officer best practices.

Members of the New Jersey National Guard recently partnered with the Republic of Cyprus National Guard’s 50th Communication Information Squadron under the State Partnership Program to exchange best practices in cybersecurity and leadership development.

The collaboration, hosted by the Cyprus National Guard, included sessions on network security, operational procedures, and leadership principles tailored to both organizations' unique challenges. Participants addressed critical topics like network topology, policy enforcement, and strategies to mitigate unauthorized device usage on government networks.

“We have a log that alerts us to improper device use, helping us maintain accountability and respond promptly,” said Lt. Panagiotis Dimitriou of the Republic of Cyprus National Guard’s Network Operations Center.

U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Brandyn Mowers, a cyber warfare operator with the New Jersey Air National Guard’s 140th Cyberspace Operations Squadron, detailed the structured delegation of duties for maintaining cybersecurity.

“These additional duties, such as log management, are split among team members to maintain efficiency and accountability,” said Mowers.

The training also focused on leadership frameworks such as the Air Force’s Observe, Orient, Decide and Act loop, empowering participants to make independent, informed decisions during critical situations.

“Teaching these concepts to young noncommissioned officers equips them to act decisively in real-world scenarios,” said Tech. Sgt. Michele Lat, 177th Fighter Wing Command Post command and control operator.

In addition to technical training, the exchange highlighted emotional intelligence and team dynamics as essential elements of effective leadership. Discussions emphasized fostering psychological safety and maintaining professional respect during team development stages.

“A good leader is effective because of their team,” said Republic of Cyprus National Guard 1st Sgt. Nicolas Miltiadous.

Participants reviewed shared challenges such as cyberbullying and regional threats to enhance readiness and developed strategies, through scenario-based training.

By combining technical expertise with leadership development, the partnership continues to enhance cybersecurity resilience and cultivate a shared commitment to mission success.

“If we see a gap in our processes, we must understand why and take steps to address it,” said U.S. Army Lt. Col. John D. Ferrie, chief information officer for the New Jersey Army National Guard's G6 signal/data support function.

Future initiatives include monthly engagements and joint summer training events involving Cyprus, Albania, and the New



U.S. Air Force New Jersey National Guardsmen and members of the National Guard of the Republic of Cyprus participate in leadership training at Camp Panteli Katelari, Cyprus, Nov. 22, 2024.

“TEACHING THESE CONCEPTS TO YOUNG NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS EQUIPS THEM TO ACT DECISIVELY IN REAL-WORLD SCENARIOS.”

**TECH. SGT. MICHELE LAT
COMMAND AND CONTROL OPERATOR
177TH FIGHTER WING COMMAND POST**

Jersey National Guard. These efforts aim to strengthen operational readiness and deepen trust between the partners. “The State Partnership Program allows us to integrate exercises diplomatically, building effective strategies for common threats,” said Ferrie. “It’s about learning from one another and preparing for the future.”



U.S. Air Force Airmen with the New Jersey Air National Guard and Republic of Cyprus National Guard members have their photo taken during training at Camp Panteli Katelari, Cyprus, Nov. 21, 2024.

MAYS PROMOTED TO BRIGADIER GENERAL

U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, has her brigadier general epaulettes buttoned on by her children and grandchildren at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Nov. 25, 2024. Mays is the third Air Force officer to lead the New Jersey National Guard since the passage of the Militia Act by the first New Jersey General Assembly in 1668. She commands more than 8,400 Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)

Falcon flyover



The New Jersey Air National Guard's 177th Fighter Wing, flying a four-ship F-16C delta formation for the national anthem before the Pittsburgh Steelers versus the Philadelphia Eagles game at Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dec. 15, 2024. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

Fighter Squadron dedicates Jersey Jerk F-16 to local hero

Photo and story by Senior Airman Darion Boyd, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

A U.S. Air Force F-16C Fighting Falcon assigned to the 119th Fighter Squadron, bearing a new tail flash design touched down at the 177th Fighter Wing Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, Dec. 5, 2024.

The “Jersey Jerk” is dedicated to U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Donald J. Strait, a retired commander of the New Jersey Air National Guard who flew a P-47 Thunderbolt and a P-51D Mustang bearing the same name during World War II.

“The jet honors a legend of the Jersey Guard, I would even say the Air Force as well,” said Lt. Col. Michael Long, 119th Fighter Squadron commander.

Strait, born April 28, 1918, in East Orange, New Jersey, had a fascination with aviation throughout his childhood. In 1940, he enlisted with the New Jersey National Guard’s 119th Observation Squadron.

After receiving his wings and commission, Strait trained on the P-47. He was assigned to the 361st Fighter Squadron, 356th Fighter Group at Westover Field, Massachusetts. The 356th, after completing operational training in the States, deployed to England in August 1943, and based at Martlesham Heath as part of the 8th Air Force.

It was in a P-47 that Strait had his first victory against the Germans when he shot down a Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter in February 1944. By the end of the war, he had completed two combat tours – 122 missions – and was the 356th’s leading ace with 13.5 victories in the P-47 and the P-51D – one of two fighter aces with national guard backgrounds. By the end of 1944, he was the 361st Fighter Squadron’s commander – the only captain in the 8th Air Force to command a squadron.

At war’s end, Strait returned to New Jersey, where he continued to serve in the New Jersey National Guard, later the New Jersey Air National Guard. He was responsible for setting up the 108th Tactical Fighter Wing at McGuire Air Force Base and moving the 119th Fighter Group from Newark to Atlantic City. During the Korean War, he was one of two Air National Guard officers promoted to colonel. He was the first New Jersey Air National Guard officer promoted to major general and served as the commander of the New Jersey Air National Guard from 1958 to 1971.

“He is integral to the history of the Jersey Guard and the 119th,” said Long. “So to have this flagship and to bring back the Jersey Jerk is a tribute to him.”

Strait originally wanted the plane’s name to reflect the state where he grew up.



A U.S. Air Force F-16C Fighting Falcon with the 119th Fighter Squadron taxis while bearing the new “Jersey Jerk” flagship tail flash on the flightline at the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, Dec. 5, 2024. The aircraft is dedicated to U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Donald Strait, a retired NJANG commander who flew a P-47 Thunderbolt and a P-51 Mustang of the same name. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Darion Boyd)

“He wanted to name it ‘Jersey Bounce’,” said aviation author Dr. Richard Porcelli, 177th Fighter Wing honorary historian and honorary wing commander. “But his crew chief said, ‘No, no, another plane in the group has that name already.’”

Strait’s crew chief was the person who came up with the “Jersey Jerk” idea.

“His crew chief said, ‘Any guy that would take off in a single-engine airplane, cross the North Sea in the wintertime and take a chance of getting shot by the Luftwaffe or by anti-aircraft fire has got to be a jerk.’ And Strait said ‘Yeah, you’re right,’” said Porcelli.

Long highlights the significance of maintaining Strait’s legacy.

“It’s important for us to never forget from where we came,” said Long. “To have our new 119th FS flagship carry the name “Jersey Jerk” is an absolute honor and will serve as a constant reminder of just how great this fighter squadron is.”

Additional material: “From enlisted to ace” by Tech. Sgt. Matt Hecht, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs



Portrait of U.S. Army Air Forces Maj. Donald J. Strait next to his P-47 Thunderbolt named ‘Jersey Jerk’. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Jersey Blues home for the holidays after CENTCOM deployment

By Maj. Amelia Thatcher, New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs office

More than 1,500 Soldiers of the New Jersey Army National Guard returned to their loved ones between Thanksgiving week and December 22, 2024, ending a harrowing year of the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team’s overseas deployment in Iraq, Syria and Kuwait.

“I am overjoyed to have welcomed every single one of our Soldiers safely home this past month,” said U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey. “This deployment was the New Jersey National Guard’s largest since 2008 and occurred during high tensions in the Middle East following the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and immediately prior to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Their years of rigorous training paid off and our prayers for their safety were answered.”

U.S. Army Col. Brian Stramaglia and Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin Kirkpatrick led the 44th IBCT throughout the nine-month deployment in support of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, where the Jersey Blues served as the base command and combined arms maneuver element. There, the New Jersey-led formation included Soldiers of the 1-181st Infantry Regiment, Massachusetts Army National Guard and 1-121st Infantry Regiment, 48th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Georgia Army National Guard.

“We did our duty to the state and nation,” said Col. Stramaglia. “I am incredibly proud of our Jersey Blues, who have given so much in service time and again. Now, getting them home to our families is the most important thing. I am so very grateful to the extended New Jersey family for their boundless support, from the moment we received the warning order more than two years ago, to now as we step off the buses here at home station, through the next 90 days into the new year and Yellow Ribbon.”

Throughout their deployment, the Soldiers of the 44th IBCT earned more than 650 combat action badges/combat infantryman badges/combat medical badges, 300 Bronze Stars, and more than a dozen Purple Hearts. The Jersey Blues faced multiple combat engagements, including ambush and enemy ground attack, indirect fire and more than 75 attacks from kamikaze drones.

Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve is dedicated to the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the advising, assisting and enabling of the Iraqi Security Forces, Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Free Army within the United States Central command area of responsibility.



Above: More than 100 U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, are welcomed home by family members and friends at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 14, 2024. Over 1,500 44th IBCT Soldiers deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the largest deployment of NJARNG Soldiers since 2008. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

Below: Family members and friends welcome home more than 240 U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th IBCT in time for the holidays at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 20, 2024. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)





Above and below: Family members and friends are reunited with 200 U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, at the

National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 3, 2024. (New Jersey National Guard photos by Mark C. Olsen)



Above: More than 100 U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th IBCT are welcomed home in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 14, 2024. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

Below: The last group of U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th IBCT are welcomed in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 22, 2024. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)



HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS



More than 100 U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, are welcomed home by family members and friends in time for the holidays at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, Dec. 17, 2024. More than 1,500 44th IBCT Soldiers deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the largest deployment of NJARNG Soldiers since 2008. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Derek Vasquez)