

# RAVEN FOCUS 2025

81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team roll through Yakima Training Center in July, testing their abilities and challenging themselves as they prepare for an National Training Center rotation





More than 1,500 Soldiers with the Washington National Guard's 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team converged at Yakima Training Center this month for Raven Focus, a collective, high-intensity, field training exercise.

Lasting from July 14 to July 24, 2025, Raven Focus capitalized on the two weeks of annual training typical to National Guard units to give Soldiers a more thorough and intensive training experience than the usual drill weekend.

Raven Focus was the first time the 81st SBCT trained together as a brigade since July of 2018, pushing Soldiers and leaders to collaborate with units and staff they don't typically interact with and learn to operate as a single team.

"We've been able to see all the things we've done really well...we've found a few things we need to work on as a team," said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Jacob Baur, an ammunition logistics non-commissioned officer with the 81st SBCT. "We've been able to work that process from start to finish out here in the field, where we would've never been able to do that on a regular drill weekend."

Headquartered at Camp Murray, in Tacoma, Wash., the 81st SBCT makes up nearly half of the Washington Army National Guard, with two regiments located in Oregon and California, and consists of artillery, infantry, engineering, and support and logistics assets.

"For a lot of these Soldiers, they've never seen an operation like this," explained Baur. "They usually work at a company level, and now this is a brigade level. So they've been able to see the relationship between the brigade and the battalion."

For Spc. Mariia Pecherytsia, a combat medic with Charlie Company, 181st Brigade Support Battalion, Raven Focus was her first annual training experience and she was impressed by the scale.

"We've done cross-training with other companies [to see] what capabilities they have," said Pecherytsia. "But I don't think we usually get to do a lot of that interaction with the other companies, so now this is giving us the bigger picture."

In addition to Washington National Guard Soldiers, the event was augmented by service members from partner nations, to include the Royal Thai Army, Canadian Army, and the Bulgarian Land Forces. These military-to-military engagements facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise between U.S. Army personnel and their counterparts overseas through the U.S. Army Subject Matter Expert Exchange program and the National Guard's State Partnership Program.

Raven Focus was built to offer training opportunities that go above-and-beyond the standard - an aim that is intentional, according to the 81st SBCT senior leaders.

"If we train and fight like everyone else, we'll be just like everyone else," said Col. Craig Broyles, commander of the 81st SBCT. "We want to be better."

Training collectively as a brigade creates unity of purpose, regardless of warfighting function, enabling subordinate units and ultimately strengthening the organization as a whole.

"This is probably one of the things that sometimes gets forgotten by the military, and that's the support behind the mission," said Baur. "And these guys are here doing that."

- Story by Meredith Vincent, Photos by Meredith Vincent, Adeline Witherspoon and Tristan Salsibury



## Celebrating the 4,000th graduate of the Youth Academy

Spokane teen Tristyn Williams said he had pretty much given up on school. He wasn't doing his homework. He was skipping school. He was making bad choices.

But, after five months at the Washington Youth ChalleNGe Academy in Bremerton, he's back on track and is expected to graduate Ferris High School next year.

"I was behind by a good full year, and now I will be caught up," the 17-year-old said. "I'm really proud of that."

In June, Williams officially became the 4,000th graduate of the Washington Youth ChalleNGe Academy, a free, state-run life intervention-credit retrieval program which had its first class in 2009. Any eligible teen of Washington state lives in housing provided on campus in Bremerton and immerses themselves in a focused approach for getting back on track in school and better equipped for life.

"Being the 4,000th graduate — it feels like I am part of a story that is slowly being told," Williams said. "And it's awesome."

Steve Wood, the operations officer at the Youth Academy, described Williams as a model cadet who serves as an example for his peers.

Director Amy Steinhilber said Williams embodies the values of the Youth Academy, always polite with strong ethics and he helps represent more of a focused outreach the Academy has been doing in Eastern Washington to make sure folks there know the program is statewide. Steinhilber says she would like to eventually see a new campus in Eastern Washington at some point.

In fact, Williams said he had talked to some of his Spokane peers about attending the Academy and its distance in Bremerton was an issue for some families.

"A lot of my friends I actually talked to about joining with me and their only reason for not doing so is because it was all the way out here in Bremerton," Williams said. "And I think if it was over there they would have definitely joined. And it would have helped them out."

Williams says he'll miss the Academy. He was part of the Spartans platoon, which had its own dedicated bay on campus. Walking around his living space shortly before commencement, he says, "It's fun at times and other times it gets stressful because we're living with 44 other cadets for five months. It's nice here. We've made memories here that we're never going to forget. There's been fun times, sad times, bad times. We'll look back at them and laugh. This is a place that we're going to remember and we're going to miss."

He says he got between 8 and 9 hours of sleep, "Two hours more than I probably would have gotten at home."

Williams said his grades improved and his relationship with his family improved. He has five siblings and they wrote to him consistently while he was away.

His dad James said after commencement that he was missed immensely, "But we're all super proud of Tristyn getting through this."

For anyone thinking of attending, Williams has this thought: "Push through. Don't give up. It's worth it. This academy is worth it. Every single second of it." - Photos and Story by Steven Friederich



Airmen of the 141st Civil Engineer Squadron deployed to Seward, Alaska for a deployment for training to increase Airmen readiness and improve morale welfare recreation sites here, renovating a boathouse and building a yurt at the Seward Military Resort, June 1 to 16, 2025.

A deployment for training is a short-term mission designed to simulate the operational environment Airmen could encounter in a real-world deployment. For Civil Engineer Squadrons, that means building, repairing, and managing construction projects in unfamiliar locations under time constraints—all while applying learned skills in a team-driven setting.

The training is intended to sharpen technical abilities, reinforce contingency readiness and build cohesion at every level of the squadron.

"Deployments for training are a great opportunity to enhance unit readiness, collaborate as a team, and learn more about each other's specialties," said Lt. Col. Jason Kesler, 141st Civil Engineer Squadron Commander. "My goal is always for us to do a great job and leave a lasting impression. In 25 years of experience, I've never been disappointed—my Airmen consistently overperform, and we've always set a high standard for those who follow."

At the Seward Military Resort, the squadron tackled two key projects. Adding finish carpentry, plumbing and siding to a boathouse renovation and the construction of a yurt structure for the resort to rent out in the future.

The boathouse is used as a support facility for the military resort will now be a vacation rental at the port with the potential to bring in a steady flow of income to the resort. CE Airmen installed new doors, applied fresh paint, textured drywall, and laid both luxury vinyl plank and tile flooring. They also installed new cabinetry, countertops, a water heater, toilet, sinks and dishwasher.

Simultaneously, another team of Airmen constructed a yurt. The yurt will add a unique and practical lodging option for the resort to rent out.

"This deployment gave our team real hands-on experience in problem solving and teamwork in a remote environment," said Senior Airman Ryan Lara, 141st Civil Engineer project manager. "We worked hard to sharpen our skills and finish the project on time."

"Our deployments for training are more than just technical training, its leadership in action," said Chief Master Sgt. Caleb Guthimiller 141st Civil Engineer Squadron Senior Enlisted Leader. "By assigning junior Airmen as project managers, we build their skills in critical thinking and how to plan ahead to keep projects moving efficiently. It's how we develop confident leaders ready to manage real-world challenges."

In addition to training, the mission produced quantifiable outcomes for the local area. During the deployment, the 141st CES completed projects valued at approximately \$170,000. The program has saved Seward Military Resort more than \$1 million in construction labor costs and generated an estimated \$50,000 in local economic impact. The resort hosts about 40,000 guests annually, and the completed improvements to the boathouse and newly constructed yurt are expected to increase available lodging capacity and add additional revenue streams. - Story by Kayleigh Phillips, Photos by Anneliese Kaiser



# National Guard Engineers build better communities Through Innovative Readiness Training Program

Members of the Washington Army National Guard are making huge improvements to a community park, while at the same time, receiving valuable training that can support both domestic and overseas missions.

"I believe this isn't just a way to give back to our community—it's a way for us to sharpen our skills," said Spc. Pharez Telona, a plumber with the 176th Engineer Company. "This gives us hands-on experience, not only in our own specialty but also in others. I've learned a lot about carpentry, and that's expanded my knowledge and abilities."

In 2023, when the city of Orting needed help with construction projects in a newly developing park, the community of fewer than 9,000 residents—nestled in the shadow of Mt. Rainier—came together to find a creative solution. That solution came in the form of the Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program.

"Since the summer of 2023, we've been working closely with the 176th Engineer Company from the Washington Army National Guard to complete the paperwork for this," said Michelle Alfiere, Orting's activities and events coordinator. "The whole process was great—working with the unit and the Guard was a smooth and positive experience."

The city's project was selected and approved in 2023, allowing Guard members from the 176th Engineer Company to work at the park during their annual training—first in the summer of 2024 and again from June 16–27, 2025.

IRT is a unique Department of Defense program that provides real-world training for military units while offering lasting, tangible benefits to underserved communities across the United States. These missions focus on areas such as health care, construction, transportation, and cybersecurity.

"IRT is what allows us to be here. It starts with the city submitting a request, and that sets the process in motion, allowing funding to be allocated," said Sgt. 1st Class Al Stockner, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the project.

For commanders, IRT projects offer realistic, mission-focused training that directly supports deployment readiness. For the soldiers involved, it's also an opportunity to enhance technical skills and gain hands-on experience they wouldn't normally get outside of a real-world setting.

"I worked on the Rogue River project a few years ago, and without these types of projects, it would be extremely difficult for us to train effectively," said Stockner. "Soldiers learn the basics in their MOS training, but projects like this expose them to real conditions and improve their craft."

Civil engineering missions under the IRT umbrella include both vertical and horizontal construction. Vertical construction focuses on structures like buildings, while horizontal work includes utilities, roadways, and even runway improvements. These projects also often incorporate HVAC, plumbing, and electrical systems, offering comprehensive training across multiple trades.





## AGENCIES TUNE UP FOR FIFA WORLD CUP WITH FIRST-EVER 'SPECTRUM CYCLONE' COMMUNICATIONS DRILL



Emergency response agencies from across North America gathered in Seattle this week for Spectrum Cyclone, a groundbreaking communications training exercise designed to bolster preparedness ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup and confront emerging threats in the digital and radio-frequency landscapes.

Held July 14–18, 2025, at Seattle's Joint Training Facility, and hosted by Washington's Emergency Management Division, the inaugural event drew participation from public safety professionals, IT specialists, and cyber response teams representing all 11 U.S. host states for the upcoming tournament, as well as a delegation from Canada, where several matches will also take place.

The training aimed to simulate high-pressure scenarios ranging from mass-crowd coordination to sophisticated radio frequency (RF) interference events and cybersecurity attacks that could cripple communications networks during a major international event.

"The World Cup will bring unprecedented traffic, scrutiny, and complexity to our cities," said Jon Lee, statewide interoperability coordinator with the Washington Emergency Management Division. "We need to be ready for anything—from a downed radio repeater to a coordinated digital intrusion—and that preparation starts with integrated training like this."

While much of the week's focus was on interoperability—ensuring agencies across jurisdictions can communicate in real-time using compatible systems—the event also introduced experimental technologies to the field. Among them: the use of virtual reality (VR) platforms to visualize and map spectrum activity across multiple frequencies.

"We're exploring how VR can help teams 'see' the invisible," said Brandon Smith, emergency communications coordinator - telecommunications specialist, DHS Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). "The technology allows responders to walk through a digital model of the RF environment, pinpointing sources of interference or signal anomalies in seconds instead of hours."

The VR applications, still in testing, could give incident commanders a new layer of situational awareness in dense urban settings or large-scale venues—particularly useful during events like the World Cup, where thousands of devices and transmissions could be competing for bandwidth.

Spectrum Cyclone also included scenario drills focused on real-world RF interference events, simulated cyber breaches of infrastructure, and coordinated multi-agency responses to restore communications during a mock disaster. The exercise emphasized not just reaction, but mitigation and prevention, helping participants develop strategies to detect threats before they cause damage.

"RF interference can cripple our entire communications system," said Lee. "If a single frequency goes dark or a control system is hacked, it could delay emergency response or put lives at risk. Just because a system goes down does not mean we can pause the event, we must continue working. These exercises help us uncover gaps before they're tested in the real world."

Lee stated this is the first training of its kind conducted in Washington state and one of the few national-scale exercises specifically designed with the 2026 FIFA World Cup in mind.

Organizers hope it will set a precedent for continued collaboration between host cities and federal partners.

"This is just the beginning of a much larger effort," Lee said. "Spectrum Cyclone isn't just about emergency response—it's about future-proofing our infrastructure for everything the world stage will bring."

The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be the largest in history, featuring expanded teams and matches across 16 cities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Seattle is one of the confirmed host cities and is expected to welcome tens of thousands of international visitors during the tournament. - Story and Photos by Ryan Dunn







## WASHINGTON NATIONAL GUARD, EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SUPPORT CLUB WORLD CUP 2025

Chants and cheers fill Lumen Field in downtown Seattle. More than 70,000 fans cheering for their team, wearing the colors of their nation, as the players on the pitch fight for everlasting glory.

That is a vision of next summer when Seattle will be one of the host cities for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the largest and most popular international football event in the world. World Cup, only rivaled by the Olympics brings millions of fans from 48 nations together every four years for celebration and competition.

In preparation for the World Cup, the city of Seattle is one of the cities hosting the 2025 Club World Cup, an international football competition where the best club teams from around the world compete against each other. This is where you will find members of the 10th Civil Support Team, supporting Seattle Fire Department and Police Department from June 11 to June 26, 2025.

"We are leading the Joint Hazardous Assessment Teams during the 2025 Club Cup, partnering with Seattle Fire and Police," said U.S. Army Maj. Ryan Dykes, commander of the 10th Civil Support Team, Washington National Guard. "We are working with numerous civil support teams as well; it is a great chance to work with each other before next summer."

A Joint Hazard Assessment Team (JHAT) is a specialized group of experts from various agencies, including law enforcement, fire departments, and health departments, that collaborate to assess and respond to hazardous materials and CBRNE (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosive) incidents, especially during special events. They focus on rapid assessment, mitigation, and, when necessary, escalation of threats or incidents involving hazardous materials. This is done through teams providing mobile assessments while walking through the stadium, setting up sensors and monitors.

Dykes and the 10th Civil Support Team are used to working with multiple agencies at large events in Seattle and across the country. The team works behind the scenes at every Seattle Seahawks home game, the 2024 Major League Baseball All-Star game and numerous Super Bowls. However, the size and scope of the World Cup makes these events seem small.

"Imagine you have not just 70,000 plus fans in the stadium, but you have fans from multiple countries here for the matches, it will require a large foot print across the city," said Dykes.

That foot print for the Club Cup included nine National Guard Civil Support Teams, members of the 10th Homeland Response Force, Seattle Fire, Police, FBI members from the Seattle office, Radiation Detection Team members from Portland, Ore., as well as other hazardous material detection teams.

"Fans wouldn't normally see us walking around because we do so in civilian clothes, our CST soft uniform, we want to ensure we aren't bringing attention to our team members," said Dykes.

Back on Camp Murray, employees at the Washington Emergency Management Division are also monitoring the Club World Cup events. EMD has been coordinating with local partners for nearly a year to ensure Club World Cup went off without a hitch. EMD staff monitored events in the State Emergency Operations Center as well as the Regional Response Coordination Center and the King County Emergency Operations Center.

"The Club World Cup gave us a critical opportunity to validate how we communicate, coordinate, and operate across agencies ahead of a globally significant event," said Caroline Byrd, Planning Section Chief for the State Emergency Operations Center. "By embedding EMD staff with FEMA and King County, we weren't just testing procedures, we were building real-world relationships and refining the systems we'll rely on during the 2026 World Cup. This collaboration is the foundation of a successful, unified response."

- Story by Joseph Siemandel and Sarah Foster, Photos by Adeline Witherspoon

In preparation for wildfire season, aviation crews from the Washington Army National Guard have been working to get certified on water bucket operations, getting as many repetitions as possible while building relationships. Guard members from 96th Aviation Troop Command partnered with Central Pierce Fire and Rescue to conduct water bucket training near Puyallup, Wash., June 30, 2025.

"The ability to collaborate with local agencies for wildfire training is crucial to our success during the annual fire season," said Chief Warrant Officer Three Jarin Trakel, a pilot with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 140th Aviation. "It enables aviators and air crew members to coordinate effectively with ground agencies to manage our drop zones while communicating on various radio frequencies, similar to operations conducted during an actual fire."

Trakel, joined by Capt. Lyndsey Thurston, Sgt. 1st Class Chris Suveges and Sgt. Tyler Johnston joined firefighters from Central Pierce and South Pierce Fire and Rescue to discuss water bucket operations, train on air-to-ground coordination and complete the certification process for 2025. The training was held on property owned by Heidelberg materials and crews had a safe area that depicted terrain in eastern Washington as well as the use of ponds near the quarry for water drops.

"This preparation significantly enhances our capacity to integrate quickly and efficiently with these agencies when needed, showcasing our unwavering commitment to our mission," said Trakel.

Proficiency evaluations for pilots and air crew members in water bucket operations is critical for support during busy wildfire seasons and part of the requirements for aviation crews in the Washington Army National Guard.

"These evaluations are essential to ensure that our team maintains the highest level of readiness to respond effectively during fire incidents," said Trakel. "Concurrently, we provided training to Central Pierce County Fire and Rescue on how to effectively integrate aviation assets into fire incidents in situations where the Department of Natural Resources may not yet be on the scene. They undertook helicopter landing zone surveys, practiced radio communications, and honed their skills in controlling water drops on designated targets."

While urban environments typically offer a flatter, lower-elevation flight path, operating in mountainous regions presents challenges such as high winds and rugged terrain. In these situations, it becomes critical for the crews both in the air and on the ground to maintain communications. Locating these ground crews and accurately delivering water can become complicated due to varying temperatures, flight routes, and wind conditions.

"One of the most significant challenges of conducting this training in an urban area is the proximity of structures and civilians to our flight paths and operations. The precision required for water release in areas that need it increases when we are near buildings, roads, or public property," said Trakel. "Our aircrews are consistently mindful of this concern, as it is crucial to avoid disrupting or damaging any land that is not intended to be covered with water. Once again, safety remains our top priority, as we are dedicated to preventing any injuries on the ground and avoiding exacerbating an already dire situation caused by wildland fires."

Trakel believes the objective for the day and the lessons learned will help during a potential fire season activation.

"Each flight served as a valuable learning opportunity for both the aircrew and ground crew. No water bucket drop is identical, as the fire dynamics are constantly changing. The pilots and crew demonstrated the capability to adapt to multiple simulated fire targets, with Central Pierce providing a dynamic set of objectives that enhanced overall awareness and skill," said Trakel.

Since 2012, the Washington National Guard has been actively engaged in supporting Washington Department of Natural Resources fight wildfires across the state. In 2024, aviation crews flew more than 75 hours, dropping nearly 300,000 gallons of water in support of multiple fires.

Washington Army National Guard and Central Pierce Fire Department Water Bucket Training

Story and Photo by Joseph Siemandel





### BRIDGING CULTURES: U.S. AND MALAYSIAN SERVICE MEMBERS CELEBRATE UNITY THROUGH CULINARY EXPERIENCE

In the midst of the ongoing Bersama Warrior 25 exercise, service members from the United States and Malaysian armed forces gathered in Kuantan, Malaysia for a special evening of culinary exchange, celebrating friendship, heritage, and shared service.

As the exercise is in its peak and planning efforts are deepening, the opportunity was sought after to enjoy some camaraderie within the team. The event, held at a nearby Malaysian restaurant, brought together service members in uniform for a night of local cuisine, storytelling, and cross-cultural appreciation. The dinner was part of a broader initiative to strengthen military-to-military ties and promote partnership in defense cooperation.

"This dinner meant a lot for us Malaysians as it shows support and minimizes the barrier between our countries." said Maj. Suzenna Binti Idrus with the Royal Malaysian Air Force. "It was very beneficial to talk some about work, but also our families and other life events".

Cultural immersion experiences are a fundamental objective of exercises like Bersama Warrior as they build connection moments and the foundation for stronger partnership. On this 11th iteration, the dinner marks a strong emphasis on people-to-people engagement in military diplomacy. It also highlights the increasing role of women in defense leadership and peacebuilding efforts across the Asia-Pacific region.

"Bersama Warrior 2025 is more than just a bilateral training exercise – it's a powerful example of unity, collaboration, and shared values between the United States and Malaysia." said Lt. Col. Ashley Coffey, a participant from the Washington Army National Guard.

Coffey, in her 1st iteration played a critical role in the planning, operations, and leadership during this year's Bersama Warrior, working directly with her Malaysian counterparts. First time participant in Bersama Warrior, U.S. Air Force Maj. Lauren Manard, 194th Wing, Washington Air National Guard shared the sentiment.

"This is such a great opportunity to gather and get to really know our Malaysian counterparts outside of the structure of the exercise," said Manard.

As Bersama Warrior 2025 drew to a close, these bonds forged between Malaysian and U.S. participants stand as a powerful testament to the strength of cultural exchange and partnership. Through shared experiences, mutual respect, and a commitment to collaboration, these women not only enhanced their military interoperability but also deepened their understanding of one another's cultures. Their unity and camaraderie reflect the broader goals of the exercise—building lasting partnerships that transcend borders and celebrate diversity. - Photos and Story by Jeremy Warner

#### WADS, PADS Integrate with Royal Australian Air Force for Talisman Sabre 2025

Operators from the Western Air Defense Sector (WADS) and Pacific Air Defense Sector (PADS) integrated with the Royal Australian Air Force's No. 3 Control and Reporting Unit (3CRU) to deliver seamless command and control (C2) during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025.

Talisman Sabre is Australia's largest bilateral military exercise with the United States. This year, the exercise expanded to 19 nations and more than 35,000 troops, spanning thousands of kilometers from Australia's Christmas Island to the Coral Sea. The exercise featured complex joint operations with air, maritime, and ground forces, as well as integrated fires.

WADS and PADS personnel deployed to RAAF Base Williamtown—home of 3CRU—where they worked alongside Royal Australian Air Force operators to deliver tactical C2 of live-fly operations across a variety of combined and joint mission sets.

"This integration demonstrates our allied air defense systems and operators' ability to work together seamlessly—at any time, and in any theater," said Maj. Laznier "Rooster" Mederos Santos, senior director with WADS. "Exercises like Talisman Sabre prove our collective ability to deliver credible command and control across a complex battlespace, ensuring that when it matters most, we are ready to operate as one."

During Talisman Sabre, WADS and PADS operators fully integrated with 3CRU operators, systems, and procedures, controlling live multinational aircraft, building shared situational awareness, and executing complex tactics, techniques, and procedures. The effort underscored the vital role of air defense sectors in a modern, joint, and coalition fight.

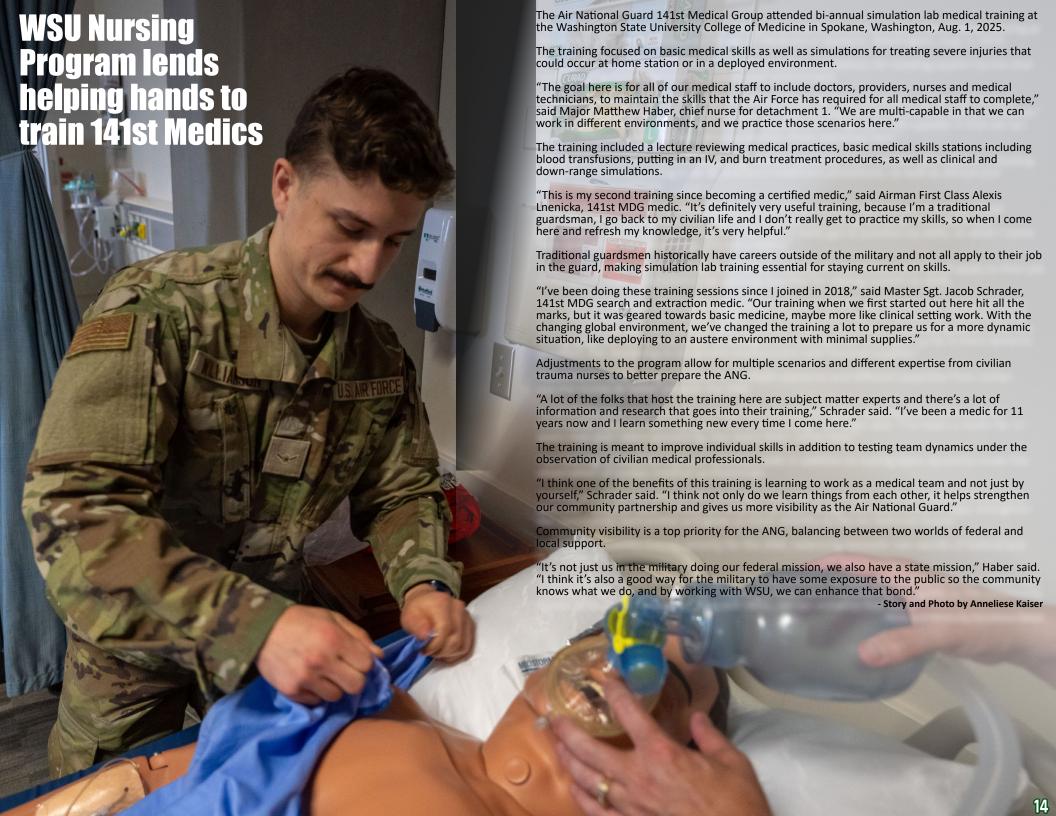
"Interoperability isn't just about compatible hardware—it's about people, procedures, and trust," said Lt. Col. Jeffrey Lum, mission crew commander with PADS. "Working alongside our Australian allies at 3CRU during a live-fly, live-fire exercise let us prove we can coordinate and command air defense operations in real time against realistic, complex scenarios."

Participation in Talisman Sabre underscores the U.S. commitment to integrated deterrence alongside Indo-Pacific allies and partners.

"The scale and complexity of Talisman Sabre create the perfect environment to stress our systems, procedures, and teams," Mederos Santos added. "These challenges drive us to improve our interoperability so that we can deliver decisive C2 in support of joint and coalition operations across the Indo-Pacific."

The exercise, which runs from July 13 to August 4, 2025, highlights the strength of U.S. air defense cooperation. As regional challenges grow, exercises like this ensure allied forces remain ready, unified, and capable of delivering decisive command and control across the Indo-Pacific. - Courtesy story and photo





# NATIONAL GUARD, U.S. ARMY RESERVE CONDUCT HELOCAST TRAINING IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Story by Joseph Siemandel Photos by Nicholas Cloward

#### Always Ready, Always There

It's more than a motto for the National Guard—it's a commitment. Whether on land, in the air, or on water, Guard members train to adapt to any mission. The soldiers of 1st Squadron, 303rd Cavalry Regiment demonstrated that adaptability during their August 2–3, 2025, drill, conducting a Combat Water Survival Test (CWST) and boat operation training at Ike Kinswa State Park on Mayfield Lake, Washington.

The CWST assesses a soldier's ability to operate safely in a water environment, even while wearing full military gear. It consists of a series of events designed to build confidence and evaluate water survival proficiency.

"The training culminated with an excursion up the Cowlitz River, as well as capsize drills using Charlie Troop's Zodiacs," said Lt. Col. Eric Seeb, commander of 1st Squadron, 303rd Cavalry Regiment. "This prepared soldiers to assist 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry Regiment the following weekend with a helocast event at Captain William Clark Park on the Columbia River."

On August 8–9, 2025, squadron soldiers launched five Zodiacs and one safety boat from Parker's Landing in Washougal, Washington, and traveled upriver to Cottonwood Beach.

There, they recovered approximately 200 soldiers who had helocast from a CH-47 Chinook, transporting them safely back to shore.

"Training on the Zodiacs supports collective training at the troop level for conducting a waterborne insertion—a key task for a long-range surveillance unit," Seeb said.

Zodiacs, an inflatable boat, are critical for inserting and extracting troops during amphibious operations, including helocast missions. Helocasting is a military insertion technique where troops are deployed from a helicopter into a body of water.

"A helocast insertion is another method for maritime infiltration that aligns with one of the squadron's mission-essential tasks—conducting an air assault," Seeb explained. "Helocasting isn't a typical air assault operation, but it could become vital for future operations in the Indo-Pacific region."

Earlier this year, 200 members of the squadron joined soldiers from the Oregon National Guard for a rotational deployment to the Horn of Africa in support of Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). Their mission includes countering violent extremism, building partner capacity, strengthening regional security partnerships, and providing crisis response to support collective security efforts.

# U.S. Army National Guard prepares for Enduring Partners

In preparation for support to Enduring Partners 2025 in Lop Buri, Thailand, soldiers from the Washington Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 168th General Support Aviation Regiment loaded two UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters onto a C-17 Globemaster III assigned to 183rd Airlift Squadron, 172nd Airlift Wing, Mississippi Air National Guard.

"I am most excited to work with our partner nation in a new country while learning about the Royal Thai Air Force's processes and procedures," said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jarin Trakel, UH-60 pilot 1st Battalion, 168th General Support Aviation Regiment.

In its third year, Enduring Partners, a joint Washington National Guard and Royal Thai Armed Forces exchange will include the Washington Army National Guard for their first time. Since its inaugural engagement in 2023, Enduring Partners has aimed to strengthen international military relationships between Thailand and the United States.

As this marks the unit's first participation in Enduring Partners, extensive training was required in preparation for the equipment load and movement. Chief Warrant Officer 1 Ross Laughton, Battalion Unit Movement Officer, was delighted by the efficiency of the operation.

"I'll be able to relax once the ramp of the plane is closed and the wheels are off the ground. Then, I'll start thinking about how to make our trip home just as smooth," said Laughton.



Enduring Partners continues to grow rapidly, attracting increased participation from both Army and Air National Guard units. The mission not only enhances cooperation with foreign partners but also strengthens the bonds within participating units.

"This will be great professional development for us as pilots—and for our entire aircrew," added Trakel.

The Washington National Guard and Thailand have been partners in the Department of Defense National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program since 2002.

- Story and Photo by Bianca Hayden

## COUNTERDRUG PROGRAM SUPPORTSTRIBES DURING ANNUAL ANTI-OPIOID AND FENTANYL SUMMIT

With an opioid and fentanyl crisis devastating tribal communities across the state, the Washington National Guard's CounterDrug Program (WA CDP) joined forces with tribal leaders, law enforcement, and public health professionals during the Tribal Opioid Fentanyl summit, May 20-22, 2025 at the Cowlitz Tribe's reservation in Ridgefield, Wash.

The conference pulled together all agencies who work together to confront the crisis to share resources and strengthen collaboration. WA CDP used the opportunity to highlight the capabilities of the Western Regional Counterdrug Training Center (WRCTC) and reinforce its commitment to supporting tribal-led efforts through training, intelligence, and operational support.

"The [Western] Regional Counterdrug Training Center has been reaching out to tribal police and drug rehabilitative agencies to educate them on the training available at the WRCTC facility at Camp Murray," said Chief Warrant Officer Four, Bill Elliott, tribal liaison for the Washington Military Department. "In addition, the WRCTC can provide this training at their reservation, which is very important to tribal law enforcement due to the current budget situation and lack of manpower to send officers off reservation."

Recently the Washington Military Department hosted a conference for all the tribal chiefs of police and/or tribal counterdrug leadership. The event was attended by 25 tribal police departments and marked the first time many of these agencies have met in one place in more than 10 years.

The counterdrug program, in conjunction with the Washington Military Department, attends counterdrug conferences in the state to help ensure that tribal enforcement agencies are kept informed about the programs that affect their respective jurisdictions, Elliott explained. The WA CDP also has provided briefings and coordination with the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program, which provides drug trend tracking, training in drug prevention, and manages drug enforcement grant programs.

Elliott and CPT Josh Moen, Washington National Guard WRCTC team member, both believe the conference was beneficial for everyone who attended.

"The conference was very productive, with the tribal representatives impressed at the level of support they can receive from the National Guard," said Moen. "A good example is the tribes do not have the funding to

access aviation assets in support of counterdrug operations so the WA CDP has made its Lakota counterdrug helicopter available to support."

Recently the WA CDP was involved in supporting tribal, state, county, and federal law enforcement agencies in the successful dismantling of a drug organization that was affecting the Lummi Indian Reservation. This support helped law enforcement confiscate a substantial amount of controlled substances and let to a number of people being arrested and awaiting federal prosecution.

- Story by Joseph Siemandel







The 194th Wing's warrant officers are not only breaking new ground — they're laying the foundation for generations to come.

For the first time in more than 65 years, the Air Force reintroduced WOs into its ranks on Dec. 6, 2024. Members of Warrant Officer Training School's inaugural graduating class include Warrant Officer Nicholas Legget, 143rd Cyber Operations Squadron; Warrant Officer Jason Oakes, 194th Communications Squadron; Chief Warrant Officer 2 Robert Peck, 242nd Combat Communications Squadron; and Warrant Officer Andre Roberge, 262nd Cyber Operations Squadron.

"It's kinda surreal," said Roberge. "Everywhere I go, someone is like, 'Hey, you're a warrant officer in the Air Force? I've never seen that before.'"

The eight-week training course, conducted at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, was described by 194th Wing WOs as a blend of Basic Military Training and Officer Training School.

Each day was highly structured — starting with a 6 a.m. wakeup and 6:07 a.m. formation. Candidates recited the Air Force Song and Airman's Creed and marched to the dining facility using proper reporting procedures. The daily schedule was filled with classroom instruction and concluded with physical training. In the evenings, candidates cleaned their dormitory and studied until lights-out at 9:30 p.m.

194th Wing WOs emphasized the deep camaraderie and strong professional network formed within their inaugural cohort as the most rewarding aspect of WOTS.

"The relationships that we made there — I now know people in active duty that do the same job as me," said Roberge. "Bonding with all the people that are going to be doing the same job as me throughout the Air Force, I think that was the most beneficial part. We keep in contact and chat every day."

Oakes echoed that sentiment, highlighting the unique and enduring network fostered through those relationships.

"The warrant officer cohort is one of the biggest strengths that we're going to bring to the Air Force," said Oakes. "There are smart [people] all over the place. There are smart enlisted people and officers. That's not a unique facet to being a warrant officer. What is unique is the network that we have."

So, what is a WO?

"As warrant officers, my job 100% of the time is making sure I understand equipment and the technology that goes into it," said Peck.

The return of WOs into the Air Force allows technical experts to remain embedded in their specialty. Unlike traditional career progression that shifts personnel away from hands-on work to administrative and managerial duties, the WO track preserves and leverages that technical depth. "What happens to tech. sergeants?" asked Oakes. "They become master sergeants, right? And then eventually, if they haven't already at that level, they're moving away from their field skills. [Warrant officers] won't."

Peck likened the position to a component of a "three-headed monster" at the squadron level. The commander leads overall, the senior enlisted leader manages the people, and the WO oversees the technical systems.

"Being a warrant officer, at the squadron level at least, I don't have a chain of command," said Peck. "Essentially, I report directly to the commander. I don't have anybody else underneath me in the official documentation and chain of command. That frees me up to get after projects that need to be completed."



# **DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR VICTORY**

### CANDIDATES COMPLETE TWO-WEEK OFFICER CANDIDATE SCHOOL PHASE III

Forty-seven officer candidates are being pushed past their limits during Officer Candidate School (OCS) Phase III 2025 at Joint Base Lewis- McChord, Wash. From acquiring basic knowledge, such as how to pack a rucksack, to leading a platoon through enemy fire, these candidates are preparing to become future leaders in various career fields of the U.S. Army National Guard.

Before beginning OCS Phase III, all candidates must complete phases one and two. During those phases, they focus on land navigation, administrative and operational planning, as well as military history, completing timed six-, nine-, and 12-mile foot marches, and essential Soldier skills.

"The role of OCS is to help prepare candidates that enlist straight off the street with no prior military experience and decide to go through the OCS program," said Capt. Eric Dunkley, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 205th Regional Training Institute (RTI). "It also takes candidates who do have prior experience and years of service and gives them a common set of instructions and developmental achievements to assist in their overall development and prepare them to become second lieutenants in the United States Army."

Guardsmen from all over the country then take what they have gathered and apply it to the third phase of their journey in becoming commissioned officers. OCS Phase III is held at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., and hosted by the 2-205th RTI.

Over the course of 16 days, candidates will undergo hands-on training and advanced instruction in real-world scenarios, focusing on platoon-level infantry tactics and leadership.

"The reason we use light infantry tactics to evaluate the candidates is because it is a base level that not only every officer but every soldier in the Army should be capable of," said Capt. Christopher Rothwell, a platoon instructor for OCS Phase III.

The 2-205th RTI plays an essential role in ensuring high standards are maintained. The RTI's cadre, recognized for their exceptional quality and dedication, help shape the candidates during rigorous instruction and field exercises.

"Resiliency is super important out here," Rothwell said. "Not only because of the actual field environment but also being evaluated and knowing someone is watching what you're doing and taking notes on a clipboard. It skyrockets their stress."

Ensuring the candidates have a solid foundation to build the standards of being an officer is crucial to the entire training process. Candidates face challenges that are both physically and mentally taxing. It is up to them to be strong enough to continue to grow.

The 2-205th RTI displays immense dedication to developing the hearts and minds of future leaders. It allows the candidates to exhibit a great amount of motivation to complete the program and become the best leaders they can.

"It's been a journey to get here," said Officer Candidate Skye McEstes with the Illinois National Guard. "I'm super excited because this is the next step in my career and this has been a great opportunity. Sometimes, when it comes to being an officer, there are those that are scared of the additional responsibility but take the leap, take the challenge. You never know your capabilities unless you push yourself and keep moving on."

The 47 candidates quickly approach the next steps in their careers with their graduation scheduled for Aug. 7, 2025. Closing this chapter of their journey to becoming future leaders in the Army National Guard will open the door for opportunities to develop Soldiers of their own. - Story by Abigal Clark, Photo by Virginia Johnson



## SGT BIANCA HAYDEN GOES FOR GOLD AT THE 2025 DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE WARRIOR GAMES

For the longest time, Washington Army National Guard Sgt. Bianca Hayden had been driven to seize every opportunity that life throws at her. However when one day life decided to throw her a curveball, she was forced to choose to persevere or to let go of everything she's worked for.

Originally enlisted in 2018 as a petroleum supply specialist with Oregon Army National Guard, Hayden made it her goal to make the most out of her military career. However, she never would have expected to turn into the military athlete she is today.

Hayden was a member of Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 168th Aviation Regiment, and was deployed to Afghanistan in 2020, where she volunteered to join Bravo Company, as a door gunner on Chinook helicopters.

"Getting the opportunity to fly and perform crew duties was exciting," said Hayden. "From the sky, the view was unlike anything I'd ever seen before."

After returning from Afghanistan, Hayden was promoted to sergeant and due to her passion to continue serving her country, she volunteered to mobilize again. Only this time, she would be with Charlie Troop, 1-82nd Cavalry Regiment, Oregon Army National Guard, to Poland as a cavalry scout.

"Even though aviation was all I knew, I decided to take a promotion and try something new," said Hayden. "That ultimately brought me to Poland as a cavalry scout."

While navigating the physical and mental stress of being a cavalry scout, as well as facing the challenges of being the only female scout in her new troop, Hayden would soon face one of the toughest experiences she has ever gone through.

While in Poland, Hayden found time to maintain her regular routine of going to the gym daily. One day, when conducting her workout, she heard a pop in her left shoulder while doing a dumbbell shoulder press. The pain was intense and immediate.

"It was a bad injury and a long recovery process," said Hayden. "My initial diagnosis didn't call for anything serious so I continued work as normal. I stayed in Poland for four months after I was injured trying to navigate what the next steps would look like for healing and recovery. It wasn't until after I got back to the states that we learned that I fractured my humerus, tore my labrum, and ripped my bicep in half."

That was only the beginning. After going through the process of demobilization from Poland, Hayden became a member of the Soldier Recovery Unit (SRU) on Joint Base Lewis-McChord. One of the roles of the SRU is to determine whether its members are capable of returning to duty or if they will need to be medically discharged from the military.

"I was very heavy on returning to duty," Hayden emphasised. "I did everything I could to make sure I checked all the boxes and a part of that was participating in activities the SRU provided."

In her free time, Hayden took part in many of the adaptive sports that were offered such as volleyball, basketball, rugby, cycling, and swimming as well as going to archery and air rifle ranges.

"While I was participating in all those things, they told me there was an opportunity to try out for Team Army," said Hayden. "It was for an adaptive team that would compete in the Warrior Games."





About a year and two surgeries later, Hayden finally deemed herself ready for a new challenge and decided to try out for the team.

"I thought maybe I should put my hard work towards something like competing," said Hayden. "So, I signed up to go to Army trials and I tried everything and because I was in a sling, I competed with one arm. I did swimming with one arm, archery with one arm and my mouth, air rifle shooting, shotput, and discus all with only one arm."

Hayden successfully made the team and went on to compete in the Warrior Games, earning medals ranging from bronze to a majority of gold.

"From there I made it onto Team U.S.," said Hayden. "I competed in an open category for those who are deemed heeled or those whose injuries affect their abilities on a lower level."

Her most recent gold medal win was for alpine skiing for Team U.S. during the Invictus Games 2025 in Whistler, Canada. The Invictus Games were founded by Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, in which wounded, injured, and sick service members from many different nations can compete in multiple sporting events.

All of Hayden's hard work and dedication paid off in ways she never expected. Her experiences brought her to new heights, although she often faced many lows in the beginning stages of her recovery.

"It was really frustrating when I first started," said Hayden. "I struggled with day-to-day tasks like putting my hair up. I was trying hard to fight getting medically discharged and then was competing in all of these sports and there were a handful of times where I thought about whether I should keep pushing or if I bit off more than I could chew."

On top of the fear of potentially being forced to let go of everything she's worked for, the self doubt weighed heavy on Hayden. Luckily her passion and drive to be the best version of herself made it possible for her to persevere.

"I would say that despite all of the anger, tears, and sweat, I could never be mad at my injury," said Hayden. "It's brought me so many experiences and I've met so many people. My life has been changed by the other service members I've met and hearing their stories made me realize that people are all experiencing different things and we're all here to push each other."

Making the most out of her time at the SRU granted Hayden a full recovery and the choice of returning to the high demands of being a cavalry scout, go back to her roots as a fueler, or find a new opportunity.

Hayden thought it would be best to take on a lighter load. Although she still actively trains for Team Army, she decided to pursue a spot in a different unit, seeking guidance from a long-time mentor Sgt. Maj. Jeffery Dvorak with the 122nd Theater Public Affairs Support Element (TPASE), 56th Theater Information Operations Group, Washington Army National Guard.

"The reason I recruited Sgt. Hayden into the 122nd was her incredible drive," said Dvorak. "She has enthusiasm to learn all aspects of the position she is in, her wonderful creative mind and most of all her optimistic and infectious positive attitude."

Hayden joined the 122nd TPASE, where she will have the chance to not only share her story, but to also tell the stories of many others.

"There have definitely been moments of anger and sadness and times where I wanted to retreat," said Hayden. "But I'm happy that I keep pushing. And as long as I can share my story and help others, it'll all be worth it." - Story and Photos by Abigal Clark



# Army Guard General Receives Order of Saint Michael - Airborne Award

During a surprise ceremony at Camp Murray on June 3, 2025, Brig. Gen. Paul Sellars, commanding general of the Washington Army National Guard, became the first member of the Washington National Guard to receive the prestigious Order of Saint Michael – Airborne award for his exceptional service and leadership.

"You guys kept this so secretive, even my family didn't spill the beans," said Sellars, visibly moved after being presented the award by Maj. Gen. Gent Welsh, The Adjutant General. "I'm honestly overwhelmed and grateful."

For more than 20 years, Sellars has worn the green beret—one of the most recognizable symbols in the U.S. military. Representing the U.S. Army Special Forces, the green beret signifies excellence in unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, and foreign internal defense. Green Berets are known for their high intelligence, rigorous training, and ability to operate in diverse environments on a wide range of missions.

The Order of Saint Michael – Airborne is awarded by the National Infantry Association and the U.S. Army Chief of Infantry. It recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to the airborne, glider, air assault, or special operations communities. Recipients are recognized for demonstrating the highest standards of integrity, moral character, and professional excellence, as well as for their service and leadership within these elite formations.

"This is a prestigious award reserved for those who have made outstanding contributions to the airborne and special operations communities," said Welsh. "The more I read, the more I thought, 'Well yeah, that's definitely you, Paul.'"

Sellars began his military career in 1992 and was commissioned as an infantry officer in 1995. He earned qualifications in airborne, ranger, and special forces before serving more than a dozen years in the special operations community. He rose through the ranks from team leader to commander of Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group. Later, he commanded the 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment; Special Operations Detachment – Pacific; and the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team before being promoted to general officer.

"Beyond decorations, your legacy is one of trusted leadership that has made a global impact and reflects your deep commitment to the Washington Army National Guard," Welsh added. "It's an honor to present this award and recognize you as the first recipient within the Washington Army National Guard."

The Order of Saint Michael – Airborne includes five levels: Archangel, Guardian, Angelic, Cherubim, and Seraphim. Nominees are evaluated by a board, which determines both eligibility and the appropriate level of recognition. - Story and Photo by Joseph Siemandel

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