

# ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD PRAIRIE SENTINEL

VOLUME 25



AUGUST - DECEMBER 2025

# ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD PRAIRIE SENTINEL

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# Take it From the Top:

## *Senior Leaders' Corner*



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

To the Soldiers, Airmen, and Civilian Employees of the Illinois National Guard and the Illinois Department of Military Affairs,

In today's dynamic and ever-changing environment, it is crucial that we remain grounded in the fundamental principles that define our organization. As we look toward the future, guided by our 2026-2031 Strategic Plan, I want to talk about the importance of getting back to the basics. Our vision is to be a relevant, integrated, and community-based joint force that is "Always Ready and Always There!" Achieving this vision begins with mastering the essentials.

Our mission is clear: we prepare our forces to respond to state emergencies, defend our homeland, and fight our nation's wars when called. This mission is the bedrock of our service, and its success hinges on our mastery of our four core competencies: Man, Equip, Train, and Deploy. These are the basics, the very foundation of our readiness and effectiveness.

**Man:** Our greatest asset is our people. Manning the force is more than just filling ranks; it's about taking care of our service members, their families, and their employers. Individual readiness – physically, mentally, and emotionally – is non-negotiable. We build a strong and accomplished joint force by leveraging the diverse skills and backgrounds of our members from across this great state.

**Equip:** We must ensure that every Soldier and Airman has the most capable tools to do their job. Being properly equipped is essential to executing any task, anywhere. It allows us to complete our missions efficiently and effectively, whether at home or abroad.

**Train:** Training is fundamental to everything we do. Through rigorous training, coaching, and mentoring, we develop the best-qualified and most knowledgeable personnel. This commitment to continuous development not only ensures we can accomplish our state and federal missions but also promotes the upward progression and success of our members.

**Deploy:** Ultimately, our purpose culminates in our ability to deploy. Projecting our forces in support of state and federal missions is the ultimate test of our capabilities. It is the culmination of our efforts in manning, equipping, and training. It is what we do.

By focusing on the core competencies of Man, Equip, Train, and Deploy, we create a cohesive strategy that drives our mission forward. Let's recommit ourselves to mastering these basics, strengthening our commitment to excellence, and ensuring we are always ready to answer the call.

Thank you for your service and dedication.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, and Portuguese Lt. Gen. Rui Freitas sign the formal agreement creating the State Partnership Program between the Illinois National Guard and the Portuguese military on Jan. 12 at the Portuguese Ministry of Defense in Lisbon.

# New State Partners

## Illinois National Guard, Portugal Formalize Agreement

**Story and Photos by Spc. Justin Malone  
*Illinois National Guard Public Affairs***

The Illinois National Guard and the Ministry of National Defense of the Portuguese Republic held a ceremony Jan. 12, in Lisbon to officially establish a new State Partnership between the two armed forces.

The agreement marks a significant step in strengthening bilateral military cooperation between the United States and Portugal through the National Guard State Partnership Program.

“This State Partnership Program gives the United States and Portugal another practical mechanism to turn our shared interests into concrete outcomes,” said the U.S. Ambassador to Portugal John Arrigo. “I look forward to seeing this partnership grow and deliver meaningful results in the years to come.”

Chief of Staff of the Portuguese Armed Forces, Gen. José Nunes da Fonseca, described the agreement as an important first step for the two allied nations.

“We are confident this is a significant step forward,” Fonseca said. “It represents a commitment by two allied nations that share responsibilities in promoting cooperation, collective security and international stability. Both the Illinois National Guard and the Portuguese Armed Forces will be committed and proud to serve together in honor of the United States of America and Portugal.”

The State Partnership Program is a Department of War initiative led by the National Guard that

supports the security cooperation objectives of U.S. combatant commands and aligns with U.S. State Department strategies. Through the program, the National Guard builds enduring relationships with partner nations by sharing military expertise, exchanging defense knowledge and strengthening mutual security cooperation.

U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, said the partnership comes at a critical time for NATO allies.

“The threats to our NATO allies and partners are increasingly complex, combining conventional and unconventional tactics, terrorism, cyberattacks and information warfare designed to destabilize alliances,” Boyd said.

Planned areas of collaboration between the two armed forces include cybersecurity, defense industry engagement, aircraft and technology modernization, academic partnerships, public safety, and disaster response.

“The partnership we’ve signed today highlights the strength of



**Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, and Portuguese Lt. Gen. Rui Freitas shake hands after signing the formal agreement creating the State Partnership Program between the Illinois National Guard and the Portuguese military on Jan. 12 at the Portuguese Ministry of Defense in Lisbon.**

NATO and the enduring alliance between Portugal and the United States,” Boyd said. “Together, the Illinois National Guard and the Portuguese Armed Forces remain prepared to deter threats to NATO

security now and in the future.”

Boyd added that the Illinois National Guard is fully committed to building a meaningful and enduring partnership rooted in shared democratic values.



**Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, speaks during the ceremony to sign the formal agreement creating the State Partnership Program between the Illinois National Guard and the Portuguese military on Jan. 12 at the Portuguese Ministry of Defense in Lisbon.**

# Governor Selects Rice as Assistant Adjutant General - Air of the Illinois National Guard

***Iraq War veteran and former Illinois Air National Guard Director of Staff will be promoted to Brigadier General***

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker has selected Illinois Air National Guard Director of Staff Steven B. Rice of Morrison, Illinois, as the next Assistant Adjutant General - Air of the Illinois National Guard.

With the selection, Rice was promoted to Brigadier General and now serves as one of two Governor-appointed deputies to Major General Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard. The other deputy is Brigadier General Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General - Army. Brig Gen. Rice will replace Maj. Gen. Dan McDonough, who retired after more than 39 years of military service.

“Colonel Rice was an enlisted Airman for the first 15 years of his career, so he understands the Illinois Air National Guard from the ground-level up,” said Governor JB Pritzker, after choosing Rice. “His proven leadership abilities and years of technical Air Force experience make him an excellent choice to serve our state and the Illinois Air National Guard Airmen and their families in this role.”

Maj. Gen. Boyd said that Maj. Gen. McDonough has had an incredible impact on the Illinois Air National Guard, helping to usher in transformative changes such as standing up the Contingency Response Group and the new C-130Js at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria. He also oversaw major construction and new missions in both the 183rd Wing in Springfield and the 126th Air Refueling Wing on Scott Air Force Base. All three wings have continued to excel in major inspections and support important exercises while adapting to meet the challenge posed by “near peer” competitors such as China.

“Colonel Rice is ready to take the reins of the Illinois Air National Guard as the Assistant Adjutant General,” said Maj. Gen. Boyd, after Rice’s appointment. “He has worked closely with me, Major General McDonough, and Illinois Air National Guard Chief of Staff Brigadier General Kevin Jacobs. We are all confident in Colonel Rice’s ability to help lead the Illinois Air National Guard as the National Guard and the Air Force transforms



**Col. (P) Steven B. Rice, the newly selected Assistant Adjutant General - Air of the Illinois National Guard.**

to meet future challenges.”

“I am honored to be selected as the next Assistant Adjutant General - Air of the Illinois National Guard,” said Rice. “I’m grateful to the Governor, Major General Boyd, Major General McDonough, and Brigadier General Jacobs for their confidence in me. However, I’m most grateful to the fellow Airmen I have served with from 1986 on. I have received mentorship from Airmen, Noncommissioned Officers and Commissioned Officers from the day I first put on the U.S. Air Force uniform. It takes a community to build Air Force leaders.”

As the Director of the Illinois Air National Guard, Rice oversaw the daily operations of the headquarters staff and directed activities of his staff members in the areas of strategic planning, policy implementation, personnel services, logistics, recruiting and retention, facilities, security and

force protection, along with homeland security and homeland defense. Before being selected as the Director of Staff, Rice served as the commander of the 182nd Mission Support Group, 182nd Airlift Wing, in Peoria, Illinois.

As the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Rice will be responsible for plans and programs affecting nearly 3,000 Illinois Air National Guard personnel at Scott Air Force Base, Peoria and Springfield, Illinois. His broad range of responsibilities will include ensuring combat readiness and mission capability of three major air bases comprised of flying wings, command and control facilities, logistics, and mission support units, while providing combat trained personnel to meet all the U.S. Air Force mission requirements. He will also supervise a full-time force of over 900 federal and state employees.

Brig. Gen. Rice enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1986. Upon completing his initial active duty basic and technical training, he was assigned as a munitions systems specialist at Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea. He was selected for a federal air technician position at the 182nd Fighter Group in 1992 and was assigned as the NCO in charge of missile maintenance. In 1994, he

was selected as a flight engineer with the newly assigned C-130E aircraft, where he obtained his instructor and evaluator flight engineer ratings. Rice obtained a commission in the Air National Guard in 2001, serving as commander of the 182nd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron and the 182nd Communications Flight before becoming the 182nd Maintenance Group commander in 2018.

He received a Bachelor of Science in Professional Aeronautics from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in 1991. He graduated from the U.S. Air Force's Air War College in 2018.

Rice deployed to Camp Dublin, Iraq, in 2008 in support of the NATO Training Mission - Iraq, where he helped the Italian Carabinieri train more than 2,500 Iraqi National Police. He is a lifetime member of both the National Guard Association of Illinois and the National Guard Association of the United States and served as the 182nd Airlift Wing director on the NGAI board. He is also a member of Lewistown Lodge 104 of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, the American Legion Post 1 in Lewistown, Ill., and the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5001 in Lewistown, Ill.

Brig. Gen. Rice is married to Jenett Rice and the couple have four children and four grandchildren.

## Cord Assumes Command of Operations Support Squadron



U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Michael O'Koniewski, right, relinquishes command of the 126th Operations Support Squadron by passing the squadron's guidon to Col. Jen Moore, 126th Operations Group commander, during a change of command ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Dec. 7. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Tech. Sgt. Vince Lang)



U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Travis Cord, right, assumes command of the 126th Operations Support Squadron as U.S. Air Force Col. Jen Moore, 126th Operations Group commander, passes the squadron's guidon during a change of command ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Dec. 7.

# Illinois Air National Guard's New Top Enlisted Leader: 'Get All the Training You Can'

*State Command Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Mertz Sees Increased Opportunities for Airmen*

New State Command Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Mertz's priorities as he settles into his new job as the Illinois Air National Guard's senior enlisted Airman might be summarized into one six-letter word: PEOPLE.

"You have to have quality, trained, people," said Mertz, who lives in Troy, Ill. and works as a civilian in finance for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. "That plays directly into readiness for our state mission and our federal mission."

Mertz assumed the State Command Chief Master Sergeant position on Oct. 1 from Command Chief Master Sgt. Marlon Burton of Park Forest, who will have a retirement ceremony this spring after decades of military service. Starting on the same day as a historically long federal government shutdown was far from ideal, Mertz said, but at least he was able to see the resilience in the enlisted force from the beginning.

"Command Chief Master Sgt. Mertz is passionate about Airmen and advocating in matters that improve quality of life," said Illinois Air National Guard Chief of Staff Brig. Gen. Kevin Jacobs, who worked with Mertz for several years at the 126th Air Refueling Wing. "I'm excited to have him here at the state level."

Mertz's advice to new Airmen is to "Learn your job. Get all the training you can possibly get," he said. "It took me a while to figure out what I really wanted to do... But how I set myself apart from my peers was to embrace education from my associate's degree to my bachelor's to an MBA, and

a number of professional development courses."

This education "opened his aperture" to think strategically, he said. So, when he discusses the priorities of The Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, with the Illinois Air National Guard's senior officers, Brig. Gen. Jacobs and Assistant Adjutant General - Air Col. (promotable) Steve Rice, he can successfully advise them on enlisted matters and help institute changes that will increase readiness.

The Illinois Air National Guard is looking at several ways to enhance both recruiting and retention, Mertz said.

Illinois Air National Guard recruiting now falls under one command at the state level allowing for the more effective synching of recruiting efforts between all three of the state's wings and to better resource the recruiters. "Recruiters also now have a clear career glidepath."

In addition, the Illinois Air National Guard is looking to do more cross-service recruiting events and training with their counterparts in the Illinois Army National Guard, Mertz said.



**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Mertz, Illinois Air National Guard State Command Chief Master Sergeant**

The Illinois National Guard's senior leaders also want to encourage more cross-communication between the Illinois Air National Guard's three wings and with the Illinois Army National Guard. The enlisted force can help with that, he said. "Get to know your counterpart at different bases across the state of Illinois," he said.

The Illinois National Guard and the military is joint, he said. This could be seen in the COVID-19 response missions and the civil disturbance missions of 2019-2020, where Illinois National Guard Airmen often worked side-by-side with Soldiers. It also can be seen in the military operations you read about in the news today.

However, the services don't often train together. Mertz would like to encourage more joint training with the Illinois Army National Guard.

Those Airmen that seek out joint experience, professional development courses, expand their job skills, and request mentorship will position themselves for future success. More importantly, they will help position the organization for success, he said.

"I have been blessed in my career. People have deliberately developed me," Mertz said. He plans to do the same for others. As the 126th Air Refueling Wing Command Chief, he created a "Career Development Roadmap," which he is adapting to use at the state level. The roadmap helps guide Airmen through the education, leadership experience, and technical skills both required and recommended to progress from Airman to Chief Master

Sergeant. While the roadmap certainly doesn't take the place of one-on-one counseling and mentorship, it is a good tool to help Airmen understand the path ahead, Mertz said.

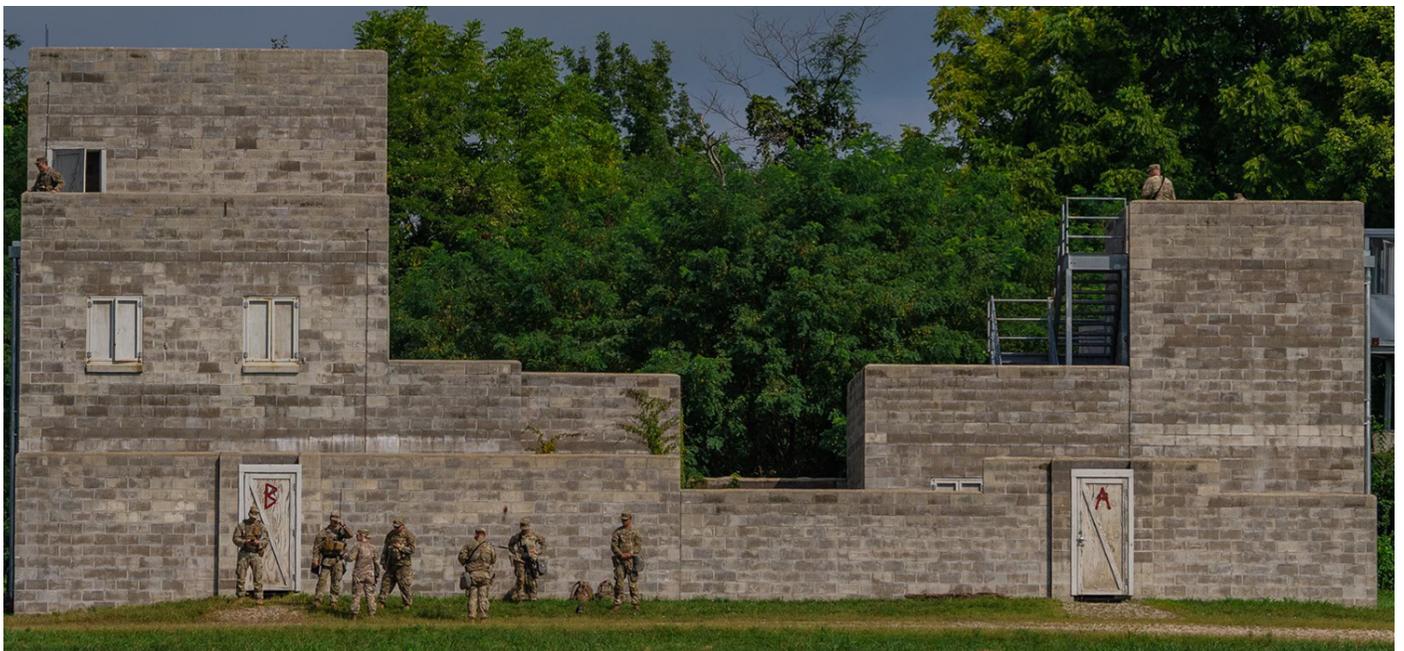
As Command Chief, Mertz serves as the principal advisor to the Assistant Adjutant General - Air and the Commander of the Illinois Air National Guard concerning matters of morale, welfare, and development of the enlisted force. He also serves as the Enlisted Field Advisory Council board, which helps identify problems or processes that need to be changed. "This is an avenue to National Guard Bureau to help make positive changes at the national level," he said.

He oversees multiple programs such as the Outstanding Airmen of the Year program as well as the Stripes for Exceptional Performers program and helps

manage the Illinois Air National Guard's professional development course seats. He is also on the Outstanding Airmen of the Year regional board.

He joined the Illinois Air National Guard in April 2000 where he was assigned to the 126th Security Forces Squadron, holding various leadership positions within the organization such as fireteam leader, squad leader, and standard/evaluations NCOIC. In 2014, Mertz became the First Sergeant for the 126th Security Forces Squadron and served in that position until he was selected as the Wing First Sergeant.

Mertz has deployed multiple times - to Albania in 2000, Turkey in 2001, Bahrain in 2003, Iraq in 2009, and Kuwait in 2016. He lives in Troy with his spouse, Amanda. They have two daughters, 14-year-old Alaina and 10-year-old Audrey.



### ***233rd MPs Conduct Training on Fixed Site Security***

Soldiers with the Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment along with 233rd Military Police Company Soldiers trained on fixed site security at Camp Atterbury, Indiana on Aug. 13 in preparation for their upcoming deployment. Fixed site security is designed to protect critical infrastructure such as headquarters buildings, command posts, ammunition supply points, motor pools, communications hubs, etc. It is also meant to prevent unauthorized access, sabotage, espionage, theft, or terrorist activity.



**U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin cuts the ceremonial ribbon to officially open the new Base Civil Engineer Complex at the 183rd Wing in Springfield. (Photos by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus, 183rd Wing)**

# 183rd Wing Cuts Ribbon to Officially Open New Base Civil Engineer Complex

The 183rd Wing hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony Sept. 24 for the 183rd Wing Base Civil Engineer Complex.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin attended the ceremony, mirroring his attendance at the groundbreaking ceremony more than two years ago.

“I can tell you there has been a concerted, bipartisan effort by the congressional delegation to invest in the 183rd...” said Durbin. “What you’re seeing today in this 24,000 square foot facility is a commitment to the

long term presence of the 183rd in Springfield.”

The complex is comprised of two buildings and replaces seven separate decades-old, antiquated buildings scattered across base, reducing the organization’s physical footprint and streamlining engineering operations for its members.

“Today’s ribbon cutting marks a proud milestone for the 183rd Wing and the men and women of our Civil Engineer Squadron,” said Col. Shawn

Strahle, Commander of the 183rd Wing. “This new facility strengthens our ability to support both federal missions abroad and state missions here at home. We are deeply grateful to Senator Durbin for his steadfast support of the 183rd Wing and for helping ensure that our Airmen have the resources they need to serve our nation and our communities.”

The new facility will increase unit cohesion, further ensuring the 183rd Civil Engineer Squadron’s mission readiness.

# Macomb-based Army National Guard Unit Mobilizes for Middle East Tour

**Story by Spc. Charlie Michaels  
404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade**

More than 150 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 661st Engineer Construction Company mobilized for a deployment to the Middle East on Sunday, Aug. 24.

The Macomb-based unit held its mobilization ceremony in front of a crowd of several hundred family and well-wishers at Macomb High School. The unit will build and maintain infrastructure for U.S. Forces serving in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility including buildings, roads, protective berms and barriers, and other fortifications.

"Today we mark not just the departure of the unit, but the dedication, the training and the sacrifice it took to get here," said Capt. Larnell Brown, the 661st Engineer Construction Co. Commander. "Your Soldiers worked tirelessly to support this mission. They are detail-oriented, fully committed and mission-

focused... They will make a lasting impact far beyond our tour."

Brown thanked the families for their strength, patience and dedication. "You are our foundation," he said.

District 71 State Rep. Dan Swanson, a retired Illinois Army National Guard lieutenant colonel and Iraq Veteran, also thanked the families and employers. "Take care of your Soldiers, take care of yourselves, and call your families back home," he said.

Swanson suggested that the Soldiers with young children take some children's books with them and read to their youngsters over the phone or video chat. He asked the Soldiers to send cards back to their families, their employers, their schools, and their churches. He said that when Soldiers deploy "A little piece of us goes with you. We'll be thinking of you every day."

Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General

of the Illinois Army National Guard, spoke about the critical importance of the Engineers' mission in strengthening the infrastructure and protecting their fellow Soldiers. He praised the Soldiers' professionalism and unwavering discipline.

The 661st Engineer Construction Company was formed in 2005 in Sparta, Illinois. The unit deployed to Afghanistan in 2011 to 2012. It was re-stationed to Macomb in 2016. It was activated for both the COVID-19 in 2020 to 2021 and for the Presidential Inauguration security mission in 2020.

Recently, the unit built a quarter mile running track at Marseilles Training Area saving the State of Illinois about \$300,000. It also completed road repairs, parking lot expansions projects, building repairs and new construction at military training facilities in Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota. The unit maintains and operates \$37 million of construction equipment.



The Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's 661st Engineer Construction Company stand at attention during the playing of the National Anthem. More than 150 Soldiers from the Macomb-based unit mobilized for duty in the Middle East. The unit will improve infrastructure for U.S. military units operating in the region. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Charlie Michaels, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade)

# Illinois National Guard Unit from Pontiac Played Vital Role in U.S. Military Operations in Somalia

Approximately 155 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's Pontiac-based A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment protected U.S. personnel and equipment in the Horn of Africa from October 2024 to July 2025, improving the security posture in a strategically important part of the world.

"Alpha Troop set the standard from day one for Task Force Associator in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. We exceeded every expectation and accomplished the mission, leaving our area or responsibility better off than when we arrived. It was great to see our Soldiers operate at such a high level and integrate with various US forces along with foreign partners. They truly made my job easy. Our Soldiers endured a lot along the way, but stayed resilient to get the mission done," said Capt. Andrew Mix, the unit's commander. "I am beyond proud of our Soldiers and

impressed with everything we accomplished in Somalia."

Most of the deployed Soldiers were from A Troop but also included 106th Cavalry Soldiers from Dixon and Aurora as well as about 20 Soldiers from the Chicago-based 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment.

The Soldiers protected vital U.S. infrastructure at two Cooperative Security Locations in Somalia, the Baledogle Military Airfield and in Kismayo. The unit developed battle-drill standard operating procedures, fortified the entry control point, and conducted weekly patrols at Baledogle – all enhancing the security posture on and around the base.



**Soldiers with the Pontiac-based Troop A, 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment are welcomed home to Illinois following a nine-month deployment to the Horn of Africa.**



**Soldiers stand in formation before being released following a nine-month deployment to the Horn of Africa.**

The Soldiers also developed a strong relationship with the Uganda People's Defense Forces, which is part of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia established to help stabilize the country. They successfully reacted to a rocket attack and numerous other threats. They conducted multiple mortar illumination missions and deterred militant attacks against the base. The unit's Soldiers interoperated well with the multi-service military units and civilians who worked on the airfield.

The Soldiers also conducted critical training including the Combat Lifesaver's Course, close-quarters battle training and rappelling. Several were qualified in weapons such as machine guns, rockets, and the Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station, which allows Soldiers to

operate weapons while inside an armored vehicle.

At Kismayo, a detachment of A Co. assisted with the building and securing of a new area on the camp. They also built and operated a new entry control point and developed battle drill standard operating procedures.

"The 2-106th Cavalry has always operated at a high standard. The organization's "mission-first" mentality sets us apart from other units. Our winning tradition and high standards are upheld by our leaders and instilled into our Soldiers from day one," said 1st Sgt. Kelly Bishop, the unit's senior enlisted leader.

Bishop said that the deployment lived up to those high standards. "We set the standard for the rest of the Task Force to follow which was made up of nine companies. We

led the Task Force in everything from sustainment and logistics to training and operations," he said. "Our Soldier's professionalism, hard work, and dedication to mission success did not go unnoticed. Our Soldiers executed well above the standard and drastically improved overall security operations in our area of operations. Our improvements and accomplishments enabled our Partner Force freedom of maneuver, and directly attributed to their success. I am beyond proud of how our Soldiers executed and what they accomplished on this mission. It was truly an honor and a privilege to be a part of this mission and to have had the opportunity to serve as the First Sergeant for the outstanding Soldiers of Alpha Troop, 2-106th Cavalry."



### ***Quinton Assumes Command of 168th Contingency Response Squadron***

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Will Quinton assumes command of the 168th Contingency Response Squadron in a ceremony Dec. 7, 2025, at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Illinois. The 168th Contingency Response Squadron is one of two squadrons that make up the 182nd Contingency Response Group. (Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Avery Litton)

# 178th Infantry Regiment Welcomes New Commander

**Story and Photos by Sgt. Xzavier Marte  
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment**

Lt. Col. John A. Christel assumed command of 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment from Lt. Col. Andrew V. Salmo during a change of command ceremony at General Jones Armory, in Chicago, Dec. 6.

A change of command ceremony is a time-honored military tradition that symbolizes the transfer of authority and responsibility from the outgoing commander to the incoming commander. This transition ensures the continuity and effectiveness of the unit's mission, operations and commitment to service.

The 1-178th Infantry Battalion deployed to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility under the command of Salmo, returning in April. The battalion received a Meritorious Unit Commendation for executing a dynamic mission in eight countries across the Arabian Peninsula.

"It's bittersweet, I love being their commander," Salmo said. "The Soldiers here did a great job. They have high standards of discipline, a lot of professionalism, and so I feel proud of everything that they've done in the last two years and especially during the deployment."

Christel, who previously served as the executive officer of the 244th Digital Liaison Detachment expressed his enthusiasm for the new role.

"It's a prestigious unit that has accomplished great things. I'm very humbled and excited to be put in this position," said Christel.

The 1-178th has a rich history dating back to 1878 which includes participation in The Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and the Global War on Terrorism. It traces its lineage to the "Fighting" 8th Infantry Regiment, an all African-American unit that was also



**Lt. Col. John A. Christel, incoming commander of the 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, receives the battalion guidon from Col. Michael Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team during the battalion's change of command ceremony in Chicago, on Dec. 6. Christel served in the 6th Battalion, 54th Security Forces Assistance Brigade (SFAB) from 2021-2024.**

based in Chicago's southside. The Victory Monument in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago was erected in honor of the 8th Infantry's service in World War I.

"I hope to build upon the success that they've already accomplished, represent the state of Illinois well, represent the Illinois National Guard and fulfill the guidance that the brigade gives me," Christel said. "I will work as hard as I can to make sure we are successful. I will care for the Soldiers, and I will put all my effort into it."

1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment is part of the National Guard's 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team with more than



**Lt. Col. Andrew V. Salmo, outgoing commander of the 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, receives the Meritorious Service Medal from Col. Michael Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, on Dec. 6.**

3,500 Soldiers. The 33rd IBCT is the largest brigade in the Illinois Army National Guard and has units with lineage dating back to the Black Hawk War.

# Elmhurst Officer Takes Command of Illinois Army National Guard Infantry Brigade

**Story by Sgt. 1st Class Katie Grandori  
139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment**

Col. Michael R. Kowalski of Elmhurst, Illinois, assumed command of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) from Col. Seth Hible of Winfield, Illinois, during a change of command ceremony in Urbana, Aug. 17.

Kowalski, a data scientist with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in his civilian life, was the commander of the 244th Digital Liaison Detachment, 65th Troop Command, for the past two years. He had previously served for two decades in the 33rd IBCT including as the 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment's commander, executive officer, and operations officer and as the brigade's operations officer, executive officer, and now commander.

"It has been my honor and privilege to have served this brigade for over 20 years," said Kowalski, adding that he looked forward to leading the brigade as it evolves to meet modern threats.

Hible, a 31-year Lake Park High School, Roselle, Illinois teacher in his civilian life, said that he was the last Cold War-era commander of the 33d IBCT and Kowalski would represent a new generation of commanders for the brigade.

"Today, I take off my blue (Infantry) cord which I have worn for over 40 years," Hible said. "We need change. We need to move forward. ... Continue what we started and more

importantly evolve into the next thing."

Hible's next assignment will be as the Illinois Army National Guard's Chief of Staff. He will remain a traditional National Guard officer.

Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the Illinois Army National Guard, presented Hible with the Legion of Merit for his exceptional achievements while serving as the commander. Eastridge served as the 33rd IBCT's commander before relinquishing command of the brigade to Hible in January 2023.

With more than 3,500 Soldiers, the 33rd IBCT is the largest brigade in the Illinois Army National

Guard and has units with lineage dating back to the Black Hawk War in 1832.

Both Hible and Kowalski have extensive overseas and domestic response experience. Both were deployed to Afghanistan with the 33rd IBCT from 2008-2009. Hible was the Illinois National Guard's Director of Domestic Operations during the COVID-19 and civil disturbance operations from 2020 to 2021. Kowalski was commander of Task Force Able during civil disturbance operations in 2020.

Hible has been married to Laura for 32 years and they have three sons, Michael, Sean, and Adrian. Kowalski is married to India and they have two sons, Micah and Noah.



**Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Illinois Army National Guard, hands over the brigade colors to Col. Michael R. Kowalski, incoming 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team commander, at change of command ceremony in Urbana, Aug. 17.**

# Irvin Takes Command of 34th Division Sustainment Troops Battalion

Lt. Col. Brad Yakle relinquished command of the 34th Division Sustainment Troops Battalion to Lt. Col. Kerri Irvin during a change of command ceremony Sept. 13 at Marseilles Training Center.

Yakle, who plans to retire from military service, reflected on his time with the battalion and the camaraderie built during their recent deployment and Annual Training.

Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy, 34th Division Sustainment Brigade commander, shared her confidence in Irvin's leadership.

"You'll do great," she said. "You have our support."

(Photos by Sgt. 1st Class Alicia Collins, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team)



**Lt. Col. Kerri Irvin, incoming commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Troops Battalion, speaks to the unit during the change of command ceremony.**



**Col. Beth Roxworthy, commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, passes the 34th Division Sustainment Troops Battalion guidon to incoming battalion commander Lt. Col. Kerri Irvin during a change of command ceremony.**



**Soldiers of the 34th Division Sustainment Troops Battalion stand in formation during the change of command ceremony Sept. 13 at Marseilles Training Center.**

# Wester Assumes Command of Chemical Battalion

Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth relinquished command of the 44th Chemical Battalion to Lt. Col. Chad Wester at Heartland Community College, in Normal, Illinois, Aug. 10.

Dodsworth enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1998 and has since deployed to Kuwait with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, to Germany with Company C, 2-130th Inf Regiment as a member of Task Force Santa Fe, and to Kandahar, Afghanistan, as commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion and as the Forward Logistics Base Officer in Charge.

“Serving you as commander has been the privilege of a lifetime, and quite honestly, the highlight of my 27-year career,” Dodsworth told his Soldiers. “Though I leave this command today, I will forever carry with me the lessons I learned, the memories made and the pride of being on an amazing team that you all have built.”

Wester enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 1989, being assigned to the Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team from 1989 to 1992, before attending the Illinois Army National Guard’s Officer Candidate School in 2008 at Camp Lincoln, and commissioning as a chemical officer in the 44th Chemical Battalion.

“It is here that I learned the foundational lessons of leadership, teamwork, and the critical importance of our



**Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth is presented with the Meritorious Service Medal during the change of command ceremony.**

mission,” said Wester. “To return now, entrusted with the responsibility of leading this team is humbling and deeply meaningful to me.”



**Col. David Helfrich, commander of the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, presents the 44th Chemical Battalion guidon to Lt. Col. Chad Wester during a change of command ceremony Aug. 10.**

# Jacobs Assumes Command of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade

Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter relinquished command of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade to Lt. Col. Allison Jacobs during a change of command ceremony at Rock Island Arsenal Sept. 7.

Kreiter assumed command in April 2023. He deployed to Romania with LBAF 660, where he spearheaded 38 command engagements and conducted more than 150 engagements. He managed and ensured the successful OCONUS employments of over seven advisor teams throughout his tenure of his command, to the Philippines, Romania, Djibouti, and the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. He is the Executive Officer for the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

Jacobs brings a career of sustainment experience to 6-54 SFAB, having most recently commanded the 634th Brigade Support Battalion with the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.



Col. Beth Roxworthy, commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, presents Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter, outgoing commander of the 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, the Meritorious Service Medal during the brigade's change of command ceremony.



Col. Beth Roxworthy, commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, passes the guidon of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade to Lt. Col. Allison Jacobs, incoming 6-54th SFAB commander during the brigade's change of command ceremony.

# Illinois Air Guard achieves recruiting excellence in 2025

**Story by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus  
182nd Airlift Wing Public Affairs**

Recruiters previously assigned to the 182nd Airlift Wing now fall under a new Illinois Air National Guard squadron assigned to the Illinois Joint Force Headquarters.

They joined recruiters from the 183rd Wing in Springfield, and the 126th Air Refueling Wing at Scott Air Force Base, in a statewide recruiting squadron assigned to Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

The redesignation aims to improve efficiency and boost enlistment numbers.

According to U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Darrin Kesler, the 182nd Airlift Wing recruiting flight chief, this change follows a resource study conducted by the National Guard Bureau showing administrative tasks were limiting recruiters' ability to engage with potential applicants.

To address the issue, the National Guard Bureau began restructuring recruiting efforts.

State-level squadrons were formed to reorganize the recruiting effort, including dedicated support roles such as an officer in charge, senior enlisted leader, marketing specialist, medical administrator, training manager and administrative specialist to support a more uniform training pipeline.

The restructuring is intended to standardize processes and allow recruiters to focus on direct outreach while reducing delays in getting enlistees trained. The squadron now operates as a single organization with multiple locations across the state.

Each unit — the 182nd Airlift Wing, 183rd Wing and 126th Air Refueling Wing — includes recruiters, retention managers and administrative support. Additional recruiters have also been placed in Chicago and Champaign to increase coverage of the state, with plans to place one in Bloomington.

Early results from the redesignation have been significant. Statewide recruitment numbers reached record levels for fiscal year 2025, which Kesler attributes to consistent procedures and cooperation

among units.

Sixteen recruiters currently cover the state, and the squadron is in the process of hiring for the newly designated positions while continuing normal recruiting operations.

Staff Sgt. Olivia Hatton and Tech. Sgt. Sarah Reiman, both production recruiters working out of the 182nd Airlift Wing, received individual awards for outstanding performance during fiscal year 2025.

Hatton won Rookie Recruiter of the Year for the Illinois Air National Guard with 41 accessions and the Air National Guard Director's Challenge with 21 accessions in the fourth quarter.

Hatton reflected on feeling lucky to both be qualified for military service and to be able to help others become qualified and join.

"The biggest reason why I stay being a recruiter, why I keep re-enlisting, why I choose to continue my

job, is because there are people who would do anything to be here," she said. "And I get to be here."

Reiman won Top Overall Recruiter for the Illinois Air National Guard with 47 accessions, which was over 200 percent above her goal.

"I think it's really important for people to know how hard this job is. It's not easy," Reiman said. "If anything, it's just getting harder to get into the military. So when our team puts up the numbers that we are, we truly are putting a lot of people in and doing a lot of hard work...So I'm just proud of our team, our numbers and the state as a whole. We've done such a great job."

Looking ahead, Kesler expects continued growth as the new squadron structure streamlines processes and training across the state. He said the redesignation positions the Illinois Air National Guard for sustained recruitment success.



## **Harpster New 126th Command Chief Master Sergeant**

Command Chief Master Sgt. Chance Harpster assumed responsibility as the 126th Air Refueling Wing command chief master sergeant during a ceremony Sept. 6. Harpster replaces Command Chief Master Sgt. Chris Mertz who became the Illinois National Guard's State Command Chief Master Sergeant. (Illinois Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Ces White)

# 183rd Wing Demonstrates Readiness in Agile Combat Employment Warfare at Forward Operating Site During Exercise WARHAMMER

**Story by Staff Sgt. Paul Lauricella  
183rd Wing**

Members of the 183rd Wing completed a three-day readiness exercise designed to measure and strengthen the ability of Airmen to operate under degraded conditions. The exercise was conducted in locations simultaneously, the 183rd Wing in Springfield and at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria.

Exercise WARHAMMER, held

Sept. 5–7, tested participants on their ability to complete essential duties under duress and in simulated environments meant to replicate real-world threats. Airmen were required to carry out routine job tasks while wearing mission-oriented protective posture gear, or MOPP, which includes a gas mask, and chemical resistant heavy pants and jacket. The equipment is designed to protect against chemical, biological,

radiological and nuclear (CBRN) hazards, and its use during the exercise added difficulty to every task.

The exercise involved coordination between the 183rd Wing and the 182nd Airlift Wing. By staging events at both Springfield and Peoria, planners sought to simulate operations across multiple locations and to test how well units could respond to simultaneous challenges.

Oversight was conducted by the 183rd Wing Inspection Team, which worked in conjunction with the base Inspector General's office to evaluate Airmen throughout the three-day period. Evaluators measured not only whether tasks were completed but how effectively Airmen adapted to degraded conditions, responded to simulated emergencies and maintained operational standards.

Planners were tasked with creating scenarios that reflected realistic conditions while still reinforcing training objectives. By combining both evaluation and education, the exercise aimed to ensure Airmen were tested on core tasks while also sharpening their ability to apply those skills under pressure.

Exercise WARHAMMER concluded Sept. 7 with assessments that will inform future planning and help refine training across both the 183rd and 182nd Wings.





# Approximately 550 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers Return from Overseas Deployment

The holidays came early for family and friends of about 550 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, as the unit returned to Illinois Dec. 6 and Dec. 12 following a 10-month overseas deployment.

The Soldiers from the Blackhawk Battalion were mobilized in ceremonies Feb. 8-9 in support of Operation Spartan Shield and deployed to seven countries throughout the U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility, namely Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Israel.

"I want to thank the families for being here today to welcome back these great warriors," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard during the Rockford ceremony. "Without your support they can't do what we ask of them."

Boyd said he gave the Soldiers tasks to complete while they were deployed.

"I told them to take care of each other. They did that because they all came home," he said. "I told them to better themselves. They did that as well."

Sixteen Soldiers completed their basic leadership courses. In addition, 36 Soldiers earned the German Schutzenschnur, the German Armed Forces Badge of Weapons Proficiency, a marksmanship award for demonstrating skill with a rifle and pistol. Twenty-six Soldiers also completed a Norwegian Foot March.

During the deployment, the Soldiers conducted security forces and base defense operations, securing critical assets and infrastructure, according to Lt. Col. Edward Worman, Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment.

"Our Soldiers successfully conducted security forces and base defense operations in 18 locations and seven countries for more than nine months in austere conditions," Worman said. "They were performing



**The second flight of Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment lands at the Greater Rockford Airport for a homecoming ceremony Dec. 6. The unit mobilized in February to seven countries in the U.S. Central Command to support Operation Spartan Shield. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Haesi Fanizzo, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Illinois Army National Guard)**

security duties during the Iranian missile attack on the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Our Soldiers also provided security for two Presidential visits in Qatar and Egypt."

Worman said the battalion performed exceptionally well under difficult circumstances.

"The Soldiers were present and performing duties under hostile conditions during the 12-Day War between Israel and Iran," he said. "Hundreds of ballistic missiles and one-way unmanned aerial vehicles passed through our defensive zones."

For serving under



**Ariel Short, along with daughters, Kinley, age 7, Keller, age 5, and Charley, age 3, welcome home 1st Sgt. Dylan Short, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, during the battalion's homecoming event at MidAmerica St Louis Airport in Mascoutah, Dec. 12.**



**Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard’s 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, stand in formation during their welcome home ceremony in Rockford, Ill., Dec. 6. During the deployment, Soldiers trained alongside numerous partners and conducted security forces and base defense operations in seven countries in U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility. Photo by Spc. Kristel Cordero, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)**

those conditions, 37 Soldiers were awarded the Combat Infantry Badge and 54 Soldiers earned the Combat Action Badge.

Soldiers also trained and worked alongside the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marines, Jordanian Armed Forces, Saudi Royal Land Forces, Israeli Defense Forces, and numerous partners throughout the deployment.

“We are extremely proud of your service,” said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army, and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. “You carried forward the legacy of this incredible organization and every veteran who ever served before you.”

Soldiers from the 130th Infantry

Regiment received multiple individual and end of tour awards, including 10 Bronze Star Medals, 21 Meritorious Service Medals, 506 Army Commendation Medals with C device, earned for achievement performed under combat conditions, three Army Commendation Medals, eight Army Achievement Medals with C device, and 96 Army Achievement Medals.

Worman said the battalion was also submitted for a Meritorious Unit Citation, which is still pending approval at higher command levels.

**Pfc. Adrian Hernandez of the Illinois Army National Guard’s 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment holds his 1-year-old daughter, Catalina as he reunites with his family at a homecoming ceremony Dec. 6. The unit mobilized in February to seven countries in the U.S. Central Command to support Operation Spartan Shield. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Haesi Fanizzo, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Illinois Army National Guard)**



**U.S. Army Chaplain (1st Lt.) Merle Ledvina of the Illinois Army National Guard’s 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment reunites with his family at a homecoming ceremony at the Greater Rockford Airport, Dec. 6. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Haesi Fanizzo, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Illinois Army National Guard)**



# Illinois National Guard Soldier Becomes Naturalized U.S. Citizen During Ceremony

An Illinois Army National Guard Soldier was among 97 individuals from 36 countries to become naturalized U.S. citizens in a ceremony Sept. 15 at the U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, Chicago.

Spc. Adiodun Abayomi Lucas, who was born in Nigeria, pursued citizenship through the military expedited naturalization process.

Lucas, who immigrated to the United States in 2011, said he came to the United States to start a new life.

“I came to the United States for better opportunities,” he said.

Under the military expedited naturalization process, immigrants can apply for naturalization once they have served honorably in the U.S. Armed Forces for a total of one year.

Lucas enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2024 as a 92F, Petroleum Supply Specialist, and is assigned to Company F, 634th Brigade Support Battalion, based at Crestwood Armory in Robbins. He previously worked as an Information and Technology engineer but recently began a new job with the Illinois Department of Military Affairs as an environmental supply specialist at the North Riverside Armory in North Riverside.

Lucas, who attended a military High School in Nigeria, enlisted in the Illinois Army



**Illinois Army National Guard Spc. Adiodun Lucas recites the oath of citizenship during a naturalization ceremony Sept. 15 at the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse in Chicago. Lucas, who immigrated to the United States in 2011, enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)**

National Guard to give back to his community.

“I had a lifelong dream of military service,” he said. “I think it’s a great privilege to serve in the military to give back to the community. The National Guard helped me become a citizen also.”

“On behalf of the court, I extend a warm welcome to all our newest citizens,” said

Chief Judge Virginia M. Kendall. “Today’s ceremony reminds us that many of those seeking citizenship have already demonstrated courageous commitment to our nation by enlisting and serving in our armed forces.”

U.S. District Judge Georgia Alexakis administered the oath of citizenship during the ceremony.

# Illinois Soldier prevents stabbing, recognized for valor

Sgt. Christian Cooper was awarded the Illinois Military Medal of Valor during a ceremony in Bartonville, Illinois, Aug. 10 for his actions to stop an altercation from escalating into a stabbing at a local restaurant.

Cooper was promoted to corporal at the end of the drill day on Nov. 19, 2023.

"The first sergeant at the time congratulated me and told me not to get into any trouble," said Cooper. "Thirty minutes later I called him and asked him not to be upset. I told him I was going to be in a police report, but I'm not in trouble."

Cooper, still in uniform, stopped by a restaurant near the armory to get dinner before embarking on the two-hour drive home to DeKalb.

"I was waiting for my order when a guy comes in through the back door and started assaulting a much smaller employee," said Cooper.

He said a third employee moved toward the altercation, but instead of attempting to break it up she escalated it further. That is when the victim picked up a knife.

"There were maybe 20 customers. I had a lot of eyes on me because I was in uniform," said Cooper. "I was going to step in anyway once I saw the victim pick up the knife. I didn't want to see someone get stabbed."

Cooper made his way behind the counter, between the two combatants and attempted to get the assailant to leave. At that time the assailant became combative with Cooper and the two fought.

Cooper said after a few seconds of fighting the assailant backed off. Cooper turned to urge the victim to put down the knife when the assailant lunged at the victim again and Cooper fought the assailant a



**Maj. Jacob Ambrose presents Sgt. Christian Cooper, 709th Medical Company Area Support, Bartonville, with the Illinois Military Medal of Valor for his actions to stop an altercation from escalating into a stabbing at a local restaurant in 2023. (U.S. Army photo by Dutch Grove, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)**

second time until the assailant fled out the back door.

Cooper returned to the lobby to wait for police with other witnesses when the assailant returned to the restaurant and fought Cooper for a third time.

"It would have been nice not to have to fight the guy three times, but I'm glad I was able to defend the smaller guy," said Cooper.

He said defending those who cannot defend themselves is a value he was raised with, but he also credits the Army Values.

"I did the right thing," Cooper said. "The whole event validated the Army Values are not just words and that I really do live by these values."

He said police investigators told him he saved the victim from getting beaten up and stopped the victim from stabbing the assailant, but he didn't feel like a hero.

"I was fairly upset because my Chipotle was cold," said Cooper.

Cooper said he doesn't go looking for these situations, but he said he's glad he was there that night.

He said the Soldiers in the unit, where he serves as a 68K Medical laboratory Sergeant, ribbed him about the event afterward.

"My unit called me Batman for a while and joked that after drill I would go patrol the streets," said Cooper.



Multiple 725th Transportation Company Soldiers were awarded military medals ranging from Meritorious Service Medals to Army Achievement Medals during the unit's Welcome Home Ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay, 725th Transportation Company)

# 725th Transportation Company Kept European Command Fueled

*Machesney Park-based unit deployed for year delivering fuel throughout theater*

About 160 Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's Machesney Park-based 725th Transportation Company celebrated a deployment to U.S. European Command in which the unit completed more than 93 real-world missions, supported two major multinational exercises, and delivered more than 2.1 million gallons of fuel – all the while making personal and professional improvements in themselves.

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, lauded the unit's Soldiers for their superior performance during the deployment, which lasted from October 2024 to September 2025.

"You all are the new leadership of the Illinois National Guard," Boyd told the Soldiers during the Dec. 13 Welcome Home ceremony at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. "You now have experience deployed in a foreign land," Boyd added. "Take that experience and parlay that experience the rest of your career."

Boyd had told the Soldiers to take care of each other, keep in touch with their families, and to "come back a better person" when they deployed in October 2024. Col. Beth Roxworthy, the Commander of the unit's brigade, the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, said the Soldiers accomplished those orders. She called the unit "an outstanding team of professionals" who "significantly



Capt. Charles Smith, the 725th Transportation Company Commander, stands at attention in front of his Soldiers, including 1st Sgt. Eric Daggett during the unit's Welcome Home Ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay, 725th Transportation Company)

exceeded all expectations.”

While the 725th Transportation Company carried its guidon forward, the unit was augmented by seven other units in the brigade. “You quickly molded as a unified team and accomplished amazing things,” Roxworthy said.

Thirty Soldiers were promoted to sergeant, three were promoted to staff sergeant, and two were promoted to sergeant first class during the deployment. These Soldiers represented more than 20 percent of the unit. In addition, Sean Kiefer was promoted to sergeant first class immediately after the Dec. 13 welcome home ceremony, with his spouse, Richelle, pinning his new rank upon his chest.

In addition to supporting multinational exercises Defender Europe 2025 and Saber Guardian 2025 and delivering 2.1 million gallons of fuel – enough gas for a family car to drive round-trip across the United States 4,300 times – the unit also transported more than 125 pallets of ammunition. During a battalion-wide convoy exercise, the 725th earned the title as the “Best Transportation Company in the Battalion,” Roxworthy said.



**Illinois Army National Guard Capt. Josh Tanneberger accepts the 725th Transportation Company guidon from 198th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion Commander Maj. (P) Benjamin Reeder during the company’s Change of Command ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park.**

The Soldiers also “invested in themselves and the future of the Army,” Roxworthy said.

During the deployment two Soldiers graduated from the Army’s Advanced Leader Course, one graduated from the Basic Leader Course, one completed the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Defense Course, and five graduated from the Drone Buster Course. Thirteen Soldiers completed the 40-hour Basic Skills Education Program with each improving their General Technical scores on the Armed Forces Classification Test opening doors to new Army jobs and career progression. Thirty-two Soldiers earned licenses on the Army’s tractor truck M915, which significantly increased the unit’s capability and interoperability, Roxworthy said.

Boyd, Roxworthy, and the 725th Transportation Company Commander Capt. Charles Smith each thanked the Soldiers’ families.

“Your strength, patience, and unwavering support made every success possible. You are an essential part of this team, and we are deeply grateful,” Roxworthy said.

Smith relinquished command of the 725th Transportation Company to Capt. Josh Tanneberger in a Change of Command held after the Welcome Home Ceremony. Smith has accepted a position on the brigade staff and will be promoted to major.

Smith thanked the unit’s junior enlisted Soldiers, truck platoons, convoy commanders, maintenance section, and operations section. He also recognized the unit’s senior enlisted leader, 1st Sgt. Eric Daggett.

“Your leadership, mentorship, and steady presence were foundational to this company’s success,” Smith told Daggett.



**Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, speaks at the 725th Transportation Company Welcome Home Ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park.**

“You set the tone for discipline, accountability, and care for Soldiers. We balanced each other well and you always kept me informed and provided sound advice when needed. Your influence on this formation continues to be felt.”

Smith said the unit upheld the Army Values of Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. Dozens of Soldiers were awarded military medals during the ceremony ranging from Meritorious Service Medals to Army Achievement Medals. Among those receiving a Meritorious Service Medal was Spc. Emilia Wawryniuk, the unit’s only human resources specialist who completed 1,350 personnel and administrative actions over a nine-month period, performed Polish translator duties, resolved 18 individual pay and entitlement issues worth approximately \$8,400 per month, and served as the unit’s Training NCO, among other accomplishments.

“You represented yourselves, this unit, our state, and our nation with pride,” Smith said. “As we stand here today – months after returning home – this moment is about recognition, gratitude, and pride. Be proud of what you accomplished. Be proud of how you carried yourselves. And most importantly, never forget what we have achieved together.”

# Call to Service

## One Family's American Dream

**By Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus  
183rd Wing**

For Senior Airman Christopher Nava, a combat arms instructor with the 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, military service is both a personal commitment and a continuation of a family legacy.

Nava's motivation to serve stems from his upbringing. His parents, immigrants from Mexico, instilled a strong sense of pride in being American in their four children. That pride translated into a shared sense of duty among the Nava siblings, with three of the four finding paths to military service.

"Honestly, I've always, since I was a kid, had a calling to serve. We've just thought about, 'How can we give back to this country that has given my family so much.'" said Nava.

Nava's older brother enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard, setting a precedent for military service within the family. Following that example, Nava's twin brother, Oliver, joined the 183rd Wing as a security forces specialist. A few years later,

Christopher followed the same path, enlisting in the same squadron.

While Nava was in technical training to become a security forces specialist at Lackland Air Force Base, Oliver was also at Lackland becoming a combat arms instructor. That shared experience further reinforced Nava's interest in developing his skills and advancing his career.

"[My brother] and I have always been very close, we're twin brothers and naturally do everything together...I'm grateful to have been able to serve and it is a blessing in itself to be able to serve with my brother," said Nava.

Upon returning to the 183rd Security Forces Squadron, Nava distinguished himself and was subsequently recommended

and selected for the combat arms training and maintenance career field.

He now serves full time as a security forces specialist and, during drill weekends, performs duties as a combat arms instructor, providing weapons training to Airmen.

For Senior Airman Christopher Nava, service is a way to give back to the country that offered his family opportunity. His continued dedication reflects both personal values and a broader family commitment to military service.



**Senior Airman Christopher Nava, a combat arms instructor with the 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, performs duties as a combat arms instructor, providing weapons training to Airmen.**



*Photos by  
Senior Airman Danielle Dillard*

# Trello Retires from Illinois Army National Guard

More than 7,660 days after enlisting in the Illinois Army National Guard, Sgt. 1st Class Jeanne Trello, Senior Human Resources (HR) Noncommissioned Officer (NCO), 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), retired in a ceremony Dec. 14 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

"Today is your day Sergeant Trello. Congratulations on a great career," said Col. Paul Metzdorff, 129th Regimental Commander. "It was a pleasure working with you when I was starting in the personnel section. You are a consummate professional. I think the statistics indicate that two percent of people join the military. Even fewer make it to E-7 and even fewer still make E-7 in the Active Guard and Reserve program."

Trello enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2004 as a 91E, dental specialist, and was assigned to Joint Force Headquarters Medical Detachment. In 2006, she started in the Active Guard and Reserve Program, serving as an administrative NCO and senior HR NCO before transferring to the Recruiting and Retention Battalion (RRB). While in the RRB, Trello served



**Sgt. 1st Class Jeanne Trello, Senior Human Resources Noncommissioned Officer, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), thanks family and friends for their support during a retirement ceremony Dec. 14.**

as an administrative NCO, Readiness NCO, and Senior HR NCO.

In 2019, Trello became the Senior HR NCO in the 129th Regiment (RTI).

"When I enlisted, I was wide eyed and full of attitude," Trello said. "Just kidding, I was terrified, but over the years I learned to be resilient. Today, as I retire, is surreal, emotional, and honestly a little terrifying, but it feels right. I made it."

Trello said she had no idea what lay ahead when she enlisted.

"What I didn't expect was to gain a whole new family, complete with chaos, loyalty, and ridiculous group text messages and more inside jokes than I could ever explain to civilians."

Although Trello never deployed throughout her 22-year career, she said she has no need to explain what she accomplished.

"I showed up, trained hard, led soldiers, carried the weight that was asked of me and sometimes the weight I wasn't, but I never quit," she said. "Training Soldiers and shaping leaders is not glamorous, but it's vital. I'm proud of every long day and every weekend class. We trained the next generation of Soldiers, NCOs, officers, and leaders who will take this Army forward. Knowing I played a small role in that is legacy work."

Trello thanked those who joined in her ceremony.

"If you're in this room it means you mattered," she said. "You were part of my journey. Either you helped shape it, support it, or survive it."

She also thanked her family.

"Thank you for your sacrifices," she said. "Thank you for stepping in and showing up. I've missed birthdays, had dinners interrupted and there were countless times you waited for me to just finish one thing. You allowed me to make this possible. This ceremony is as much yours as mine. You were my peace in a world of chaos."



**Col. Paul Metzdorff, right, 129th Regiment Commander, and Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Carroll, 129th Regiment Command Sergeant Major, present Sgt. 1st Class Jeanne Trello, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) Senior Human Resources Noncommissioned Officer, with the certificate of retirement during a ceremony Dec. 14.**



Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 106th Aviation Regiment conduct day and night aerial gunnery with UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and CH-47 Chinook Helicopters at Camp Ripley Training Center near Little Falls, Minnesota, on Aug. 8.

## 106th Aviation Regiment Conducts Aerial Gunnery at Camp Ripley



*Photos by Minnesota Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Jordan Newbanks*

# 183rd Wing Hosts Mass Enlistment, Conducts Commissioning Ceremony

Family, friends and Airmen attended a mass enlistment and commissioning event, Aug. 1, at the 183rd Wing in Springfield.

The Oath of Office for commissioning members was administered to U.S. Air Force 2nd Lt. Connor Thompson and 2nd Lt. Elodie Andrews, both with the 183rd Medical Group, Illinois Air National Guard, by Col. Alan Kilbourne, Commander, 183rd Medical Group.

Col. Shawn Strahle, Commander, 183rd Wing, administered the Oath of Enlistment to seven new members: John Brandon, 183rd Logistical Readiness Squadron; Hank Hamman, 217th Engineering Installation Squadron; Gabriel Molloy, 217th Engineering Installation Squadron; Jaxson Bond, 217th Engineering Installation Squadron; Isaac Hise, Air Intelligence Squadron; Giana Zaidi, 183rd Maintenance Squadron; Cole Perry, Security Forces Squadron; and, Cameron Cauley, 183rd Maintenance Squadron.

Following the ceremony, family members were encouraged to enjoy light refreshments and snacks and take photos in the park with their new Airmen and officers.



**Col. Alan Kilbourne, commander of the 183rd Medical Group, 183rd Wing, Springfield, prepares to administer the oath of office to two newly commissioned second lieutenants.**



**Col. Shawn Strahle, commander of the 183rd Wing, Springfield, administers the oath of enlistment to seven new Illinois Air National Guard Airmen during a mass enlistment ceremony at the 183rd Wing.**



## ***33rd IBCT Supports 1st Battalion, 296th Infantry Regiment***

In support of Annual Training 2025, the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) provided assistance to one of its organic Infantry Battalions, the 1-296th Infantry Regiment, based in Puerto Rico. The 1-296 Inf is one of three Infantry Battalions assigned to the 33rd IBCT.

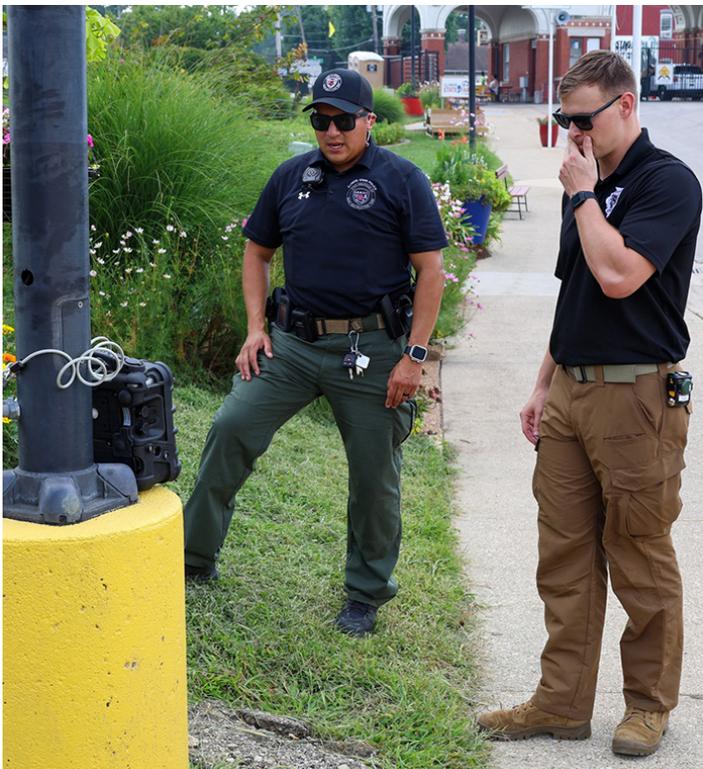
Training commenced July 14, when approximately 40 Soldiers departed from Peoria, Illinois, with air-lift support from the Illinois Air National Guard's 169th Airlift Squadron. The squadron, part of the 182nd Airlift Wing, provided C-130 transport to Camp Santiago, Puerto Rico. Training concluded July 24 with successful mortar and platoon live fire exercises conducted by the 1-296th.



# 5th CST Supports State Police During Fair



The Illinois National Guard's 5th Civil Support Team was on hand at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield during the Illinois State Fair in August, supporting the Illinois State Police during Governor's Day. The team's Soldiers and Airmen work with local, state, and federal first responders to help protect people. They are often at major events throughout the year, on hand to support civil authorities in the event of a domestic incident involving chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) agents. The team identifies hazards, assesses consequences, advises on response measures, and assists with requests for additional support.



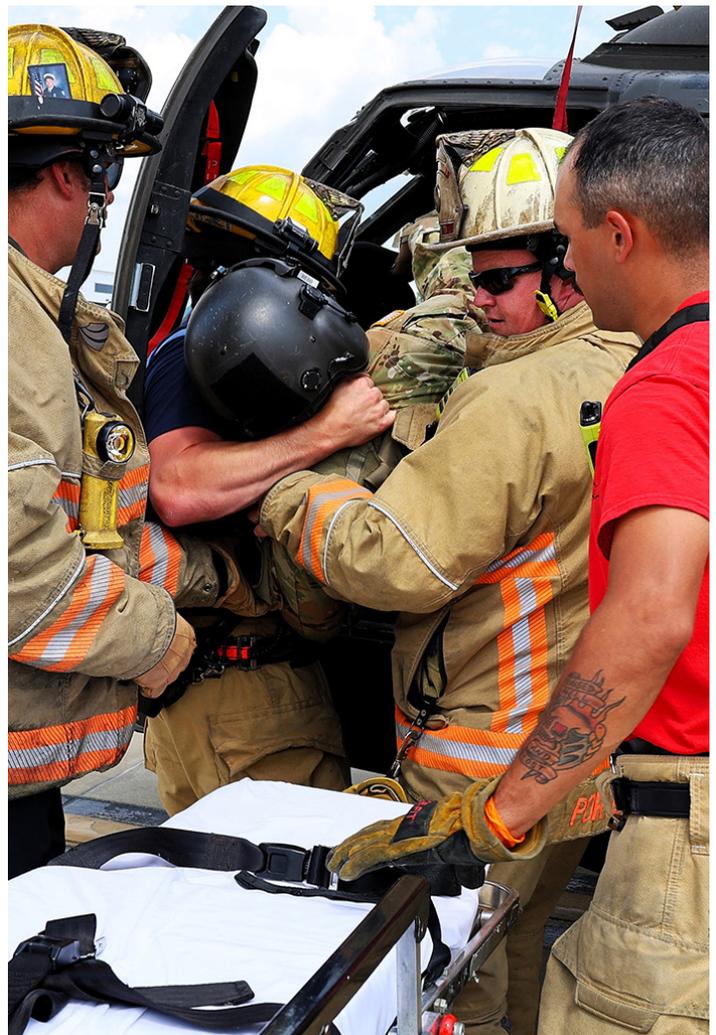
*U.S. Army photos by Sgt. Mallory Sinkhorn*



## Aviation Conducts Aircraft Mishap Drill

The Illinois Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, held an aircraft mishap drill with the Kankakee Fire Department and Bradley Fire Department at the Guard's Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee to practice in case of an emergency.

The drill, which simulated two of the battalion's UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters colliding helped the Firefighters get hands on the aircraft learning such things as how to best access people in need of medical attention in a Blackhawk. The Soldiers learned about Firefighter procedures in an aircraft emergency.





# Metzdorff Assumes Command of 129th Regional Training Institute

During an Army Change of Command ceremony, the focus is on the outgoing commander with the exiting commander receiving an award and gifts from the Soldiers in the unit.

During the Illinois Army National Guard's 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) Change of Command ceremony on Oct. 18, outgoing commander Col. Shawn Nokes of Springfield instead deflected attention away from himself and placed it on the Soldiers of the unit – and even on the incoming commander, Col. Paul Metzдорff of Bloomington.

"I'm so proud of YOUR achievements" during his two years in command, said Nokes during the ceremony at the unit's headquarters on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. In those two years, the unit trained over 1,000 Soldiers; graduated 64 officer candidates; achieved excellent reviews in four of the seven Army Enterprise Accreditation Standards; held the first Adjutant General's Modern Army Combative Tournament in five years; established a sister command relationship with the Polish military's Territorial Defense Force; advanced the relationship between the Territorial Defense Force and the LITPOLUKR (Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian) Multi-National Brigade, and achieved a 100 percent retention rate.

Nokes praised all the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in the unit, especially the two NCOs who served as the commandants of the 129th Regiment during his tenure as commander. Command Sgt. Maj. Jonathan Genisio retired in April after more than 30 years of military service. Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Carroll, formerly the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade's command sergeant major, has been the top NCO for the 129th Regiment since Genisio's retirement.

Nokes went beyond listing the



**Col. Paul Metzдорff receives the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) guidon from Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. Col. Shawn Nokes relinquished command of the unit to Metzдорff on Oct. 18 at the unit's headquarters on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.**

achievements of his Soldiers – he also gave out some awards of his own. Sgt. 1st Class Kayla Alberstett, a senior instructor in the 92G (culinary specialist) program, won the "Gordon Ramsay Award" in recognition of "creating a high-pressure environment that forges excellence and occasionally inspires existential dread." Nokes spent two days cooking with the 92G course, during which Alberstett warned him twice that he was "going to cut your fingers off."

The outgoing commander discussed how much he enjoyed participating in the motor transport operator (88M) course with senior instructor Sgt. 1st Class Cody Fagan, the "best driver in the RTI," and how he looks forward to seeing all the training packages the 88M team "rolls

out" in the coming months.

The Signal Support Systems Specialist (25U) course instructors each spent extra days teaching in the RTI's military occupational skill course or in the 25U Advanced Leaders Course. "Some of you spent well over 100 days here. Your professionalism and dedication to the success of the 25U (program) will have a lasting impression for years to come."

Nokes presented Staff Sgt. Aaron Barnett, an instructor in the 25U course, with a signed kickball in honor of Barnett "kicking my butt" in the standing power throw during two Army Combat Fitness Tests. Barnett's final throw "still hasn't landed yet," Nokes said.

Even Metzдорff received some

“RTI swag” from Nokes, including a “Train to Lead” jersey. But as much as Nokes tried to deflect attention away from himself, he didn’t depart with empty hands.

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presented Nokes with the Legion of Merit for his stellar performance commanding the 129th Regiment for two years. Nokes delivered outstanding results and empowered his noncommissioned officers to make positive changes to the unit, Williams said. Nokes was also presented with a plaque representing the 129th Regiment and its subordinate units during the change of command.

The unit runs multiple Army courses including military occupation skill (MOS) courses in motor transportation, culinary arts, and information technology as well as an officer candidate school and other courses and training teams that increase the Army’s readiness.

Metzdorff praised Nokes’ “genuine care for Soldiers,” which he demonstrated throughout his command. He said he will emulate many of Nokes’ leadership traits as he puts his own stamp on the 129th Regiment. His vision is to improve the unit and the courses it offers, improve the Soldier experience at the institution, and “support our units in the field.”

“The RTI is already outstanding, but there are always areas to improve,” Metzdorff said. The institution will look to expand the courses it offers and refine its existing courses, he said.

To improve the Soldier experience, Metzdorff said he will invest in its facilities, further resource the unit’s instructors and course managers, and listen to and act upon feedback from the students.

The RTI will establish more mobile training teams and leverage the expertise and knowledge of the RTI NCOs to increase the unit’s responsiveness to the training needs of field units, Metzdorff said.

“We can elevate the 129th RTI to even greater heights,” Metzdorff said. “I am excited to embark on this journey with all of you Train to lead!”



**Col. Shawn Nokes, the outgoing commander of the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), was presented with the Legion of Merit for his stellar performance commanding the 129th Regiment for two years.**



**Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Carroll and Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams present outgoing 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) Commander Col. Shawn Nokes with a gift from the unit’s Soldiers.**

# 183rd Wing Hosts GRIDEX VIII Exercise to Strengthen Critical Infrastructure Resilience

The 183rd Wing is supporting national efforts to protect the electric power grid by hosting a GRIDEX exercise that brings together military, government, and industry partners to train against complex cyber and physical threats to critical infrastructure. This engagement aligns with the Wing's mission to enhance readiness, support homeland defense, and integrate with civil authorities during major contingencies.

GridEx is the biennial, large scale exercise coordinated by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) and the Electricity Information Sharing & Analysis Center (E ISAC). Specifically, GridEx VIII is designed to test the resilience of the North American bulk power system against a coordinated cyber and physical attack by a nation state actor.

The electric power grid is foundational to national security, economic stability, and military operations. GridEx allows utilities, government agencies (federal/state/local), cross sector partners (natural gas, telecommunications, water/wastewater), and supply chain stakeholders to exercise their incident



response, communications, and mutual assistance plans under realistic threat conditions.

It fosters collaboration across industry and government, helps identify gaps in resilience and communications, and strengthens preparedness before a real world event.

For the 183rd Wing, participation reinforces the ability to operate

in contested and degraded environments, synchronize with civilian grid operators, and support continuity of operations during large scale disruptions.

By hosting and participating in GridEx VIII activities, the 183rd Wing demonstrates its commitment to supporting a resilient, secure power grid that underpins both civilian life and military operations.



***Henry Assumes Responsibility as 182nd Airlift Wing Command Chief***

U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Donald Henry accepts responsibility as the 182nd Airlift Wing Command Chief Master Sergeant during a ceremony Dec. 7 in Peoria. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Scott Thompson)



***Norville Assumes Command of 182nd Logistics Squadron***

U.S. Air Force Col. Bridget S. Zorn, commander of the 182nd Mission Support Group, passes the 182nd Logistics Squadron guidon to Capt. Samantha Norville as the incoming squadron commander. Lt. Col. Joseph Sander, commander of the 182nd Logistics Squadron, relinquished command of the squadron in a ceremony at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Dec. 7. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Scott Thompson)



About 65 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 333rd Military Police Co. deployed to Fort Greely, Alaska, to protect critical anti-ballistic missile sites from September 2024 to July 2025 braving sub-zero degree temperatures and dark days to protect the United States of America. (Courtesy photo.)

## Freeport-Based Military Police Unit Returns From Critical Mission in the Tundra of Alaska

### *333rd Military Police Co. Was Protecting Anti-Ballistic Missiles Near the Top of the World*

The average January temperature at Fort Greely, Alaska, is -2.5 degrees Fahrenheit, with lows reaching -25 degrees. It's so cold that frostbite can develop in minutes. Vehicles are plugged into engine block heaters to prevent engine fluids from turning into jelly.

There, with just about four hours of daylight, were about 65 Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's Freeport-based 333rd Military Police Company keeping their eyes and ears open among the frozen forests of interior Alaska protecting anti-ballistic missiles critical to the defense of United States of America.

"Few people have ever heard of Fort Greely but every American sleeps under the protection it provides," said Capt. Christian Grego, the 333rd Military Police Co. commander. "I had the honor of leading a great group of men and women who safeguarded our homeland in an environment that truly tests one's character, resilience, and discipline. I could not be more proud of those who were to my left and right."

From late September 2024 these Soldiers guarded everything within the limits of their posts and only stood down when properly relieved in July. In the winter months, an occasional moose or caribou would stroll by. On some nights, the Soldiers could see the magical aurora borealis dance across the skies in vibrant greens, blues, reds and pinks.

Long hours of security can be tedious, but the 333rd MP Soldiers kept engaged through tough and realistic training. They were deemed fully trained on both their battalion and brigade external evaluations.

Spc. Marilyn Guzman won the 49th Missile Defense Battalion's Best Warrior Competition in March 2025, topping a competitive field of four Soldiers and one noncommissioned officer. The Best Warrior Competition is used to test Soldiers skills, strength, endurance, and resilience through competition. This year, the Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers unable to participate in Illinois were able to compete alongside Alaska Army

National Guard Soldiers.

Seven 333rd Military Police Co. Soldiers, 12 total across Alaska, attempted the Norwegian Foot March, an 18.6-mile ruck march with a minimum of 25 pounds strapped to their back in June 2025. Another 12 333rd Military Police Soldiers went through robust training on saving lives at Alaska's Fort Wainwright Medical Simulation Training Center in February 2025. Twenty-four 333rd Military Police Soldiers completed Level 1 Combatives Training in June 2025.

The Soldiers practiced their close-quarters battle training in the shoothouse for hours, honing their skills between March and June 2025. This training culminated in a platoon Situational Training Exercise in May 2025 using a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter from the Alaska National Guard's 207th Aviation Regiment for aerial infiltration. As Military Police, they also received extensive training in "less than lethal" weapons throughout the deployment.



**Capt. Jade Petersen assumes command of the 183rd Logistics Readiness Squadron during a change of command ceremony at the 183rd Wing, Springfield.**

**Maj. Stephen Summers relinquishes command of the 183rd Logistics Readiness Squadron during a change of command ceremony at the 183rd Wing, Springfield.**

## **183rd Logistics Readiness Squadron Welcomes New Commander**

The 183rd Logistics Readiness Squadron welcomed a new commander during a change of command ceremony at the 183rd Wing recently.

Maj. Stephen Summers relinquished command of the 183rd LRS to Capt. Jade Petersen in a traditional military ceremony attended by family, peers and fellow Airmen. Summers has led the squadron since 2019.

Petersen assumes command of

183rd LRS after serving as Director of Support for the 203rd RED HORSE Squadron, 192nd Wing, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

The 183rd LRS provides logistics, fuel, supply, and transportation support for the Illinois Air National Guard's 183rd Wing. The unit plays a vital role in ensuring operational readiness for both state and federal missions.

The military change of command ceremony is a formal

event where the command of a unit is officially transferred from one commander to another. This ceremony typically involves the presentation of organizational flags, symbolizing the transfer of leadership and the unit's allegiance. It is a significant event that allows all personnel to witness the new commander taking on their duties and responsibilities.



Pictured from left, Chief Warrant Officer 3 (P) Jamie Huebner, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment Commander Lt. Col. Zachary De Groot, Assistant to the Illinois Army National Guard Chief of Staff Maj. Charles Auer, and Maj. Eric Weber, the operations officer for the 1-106th Aviation.

## Army Aviation Association Bestows Order of Saint Michael Upon Major Charles Auer

The Land of Lincoln Chapter of the Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA) bestowed the Order of Saint Michael upon Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Charles Auer.

This recognizes Auer as one of Army Aviation's best and marks a resurgence in chapter activity.

The award is testament to his contributions and his service and sacrifice to accomplish the mission and foster excellence in Army Aviation. His recognition is a point of pride to 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, the 65th Troop Command, and the Illinois Army

National Guard.

Established in 1990, the Order of Saint Michael recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to Army Aviation. It honors exceptional leadership, professional achievement, and dedication to the advancement of the Aviation Branch.

The Land of Lincoln Chapter actively promotes these goals within the Illinois Army National Guard and surrounding communities. The 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment is one of the Army National Guard's premier helicopter organizations, with a presence in Peoria, Kankakee, and Decatur, Illinois.



### ***Daniels Promoted to Staff Sergeant***

Illinois Army National Guard Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca, the Director of the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff, pins staff sergeant rank on the uniform of the newly promoted Staff Sgt. Joseph Daniels of Springfield. The information technology specialist was promoted during the Bright Star 25 Command Post Exercise (CPX) on Sept. 7 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt.

About 40 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers are supporting the CPX in the Higher Command staff sections working side-by-side with their Egyptian counterparts. Daniels, a cyber expert in the National Guard, works as a head of information technology for Bowhead Specialty Underwriters, Inc. in his civilian life.

Bright Star 25 brings together forces from across the globe, underscoring the United States' enduring commitment to working alongside Egypt and partner nations to strengthen collective security and promote regional stability.



### ***Graves Retires from Illinois National Guard after 37 total years of service***

Sgt. Maj. (Ret) Michael Graves retired from the Illinois National Guard for the second time.

Graves, 69, retired from uniformed service in 2005 with 29 years of service, and retired again Aug. 7 after 20 years as a civilian Readiness Analyst for the National Guard Bureau assigned to the Illinois National Guard's Joint Staff at Camp Lincoln where he assisted in domestic operations preparedness.

Graves was awarded The Distinguished Service Medal. In total Graves has served in and out of uniform for 49 years, 37 of those years he served directly for the Illinois National Guard. He's not done yet. He said he's already interviewed for his next job, and he'll continue to be a college-level instructor for the National Incident Management System.



**U.S. Army Soldiers from the 1970th Quartermaster Company, Illinois Army National Guard, in front of their water treatment facility in Baturaja, Indonesia, Aug. 24. The team is responsible for treating water being used for showering and handwashing by service members during Super Garuda Shield 25.**

## **1970th Quartermaster Company treats water to support Super Garuda Shield 25**

***Story and Photos by PFC Seu Chan  
U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys***

A U.S. Army water treatment team made up of soldiers from the 1970th Quartermaster Company, Illinois Army National Guard, purified 10,000 gallons of water from the Ogan River in support of the Super Garuda Shield 25 exercise, Aug. 24, 2025.

“We are supporting Super Garuda Shield by providing water for showers,” said U.S. Army Capt. Robert Dragicevich, commander of the 1970th QM Company. “All water operations are our primary mission.”

The team uses a Tactical Water Purification System to draw, filter and treat water directly from the Ogan River, ensuring a safe and reliable supply of water for hundreds of soldiers participating in the exercise.

The river water has high turbidity, making it too cloudy to use safely, Dragicevich said. He

said the team uses hypochlorite and polyelectrolytes, two commonly used purification methods, to make the water safe for use.

Even with adverse weather conditions such as high humidity and flash flooding, the team has worked hard to accomplish their mission.

“We’ve had to constantly problem solve because we aren’t able to just go by the shop and grab a part or call in and get some extra manpower,” said U.S. Army Sgt. Joseph McGhee, quartermaster and chemical equipment repairer, 1970th QM Company. “We’ve really had to innovate and use everything that we have, but it’s been a good learning experience.”

Dragicevich mentioned that the water’s turbidity rose due to the rain, which put additional strain on their equipment, thus yielding a lower amount than days prior. He also stated that the site was nearly flooded



**A U.S. Army Soldier from the 1970th Quartermaster Company, creates a water draining path on the water treatment grounds in Baturaja, Indonesia, during Super Garuda Shield 25, Aug. 24.**

by the high volume of rain that the site experienced over night.

“This is the first time we have treated water in an uncontrolled environment,” McGhee said. “Usually, we are on a base with access to water on flat land that we are all familiar with. This exercise gave us the chance to use what we’ve learned in a difficult environment and we’ve done that.”

Due to the high needs of water throughout the exercise, the team aims to purify up to 10,000 gallons of water a day, but acknowledges that the number may fluctuate based on conditions and demand. As more participants arrive, the team recognizes that the exercise’s water needs can and most likely will rise.

Super Garuda Shield 25 continued through Sept. 5 and the team continued its mission of providing safe water for all participants, supporting both the exercise and future readiness.

“We don’t often get the chance to work on water the way that we are here in Indonesia to support Super Garuda Shield,” said Dragicevich. “So it’s an awesome training opportunity for all of these soldiers and they’re loving it.”



**U.S. Army Soldiers from the 1970th Quartermaster Company fit a hose into a water collection bag as part of the water treatment process during Super Garuda Shield 25 in Baturaja, Indonesia, Aug. 24.**



**U.S. Army Soldiers from the 1970th Quartermaster Company, Illinois Army National Guard, start a water pump as part of the water treatment process during Super Garuda Shield 25 in Baturaja, Indonesia, Aug. 24.**



**106th Aviation Regiment Conducts Sling-Load Training at Camp Ripley**

Soldiers from the 106th Aviation Regiment out of the Illinois National Guard conduct sling-load training with UH-60 Blackhawk Helicopters and CH-47 Chinook Helicopters at Camp Ripley Training Center near Little Falls, Minnesota, on Aug. 11. (Photo by Minnesota Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Jorden Newbanks)



**123rd Engineer Battalion Soldiers Earn Norwegian Foot March Badge**

Eight Soldiers from the 123rd Engineer Battalion participated in the Norwegian Foot March at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Sept. 6. The event challenges participants to complete an 18.6-mile march in uniform while carrying a rucksack weighing at least 25 pounds, all within a set time limit. Each Soldier successfully finished the march within their designated time.

# On PAR

## 183rd Wing Conducts Post Attack Reconnaissance Training

Airmen from the 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, don Mission Orientation Protection Posture (MOPP) gear for a refresher course on Post Attack Reconnaissance (PAR) on Aug. 3, at the 183rd Wing, Springfield, Illinois.

PAR training gives Airmen the chance to practice working through Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosives (CBRNE) threats while looking for Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) -and practice carrying litters for wounded personnel.

These training sessions enable Airmen to demonstrate their ability to maintain mission-essential operations under challenging conditions and combat threats from near-peer adversaries.



**U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Kelli Johnson, with the 183rd Logistics Readiness Squadron, dons Mission Orientation Protection Posture (MOPP) gear during Post Attack Reconnaissance (PAR) training on Aug. 3, at the 183rd Wing, Springfield.**



**Airmen from the 183d Wing attend a Post Attack Reconnaissance (PAR) course led by Master Sgt. Steven Jefferies, with the 183d Civil Engineering Squadron, Aug. 3, in Springfield.**

# Springfield Aviator Promoted to Colonel

The Illinois Army National Guard's State Aviation Officer was promoted in a ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy, Aug. 28.

Lt. Col. Jason Celletti, of Springfield, was joined by family, friends, and fellow Illinois National Guard members as he became the 24th colonel serving in the Illinois Army National Guard.

"It's easy to do things like this promotion when you've known someone as long as I've known Jay," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "It's difficult to make the rank

of colonel in this organization. Today's promotion is a testament to your leadership and to the Noncommissioned Officer Corps and Warrant Officer Corps."

Celletti enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2001 as a UH-60 Blackhawk mechanic and crew chief, before commissioning as a second lieutenant in 2003.

Williams said Celletti is ready for this assignment.

"We ask a lot of our aviation community," Williams said. "From fielding the new 60-V Blackhawk, to receiving a notice of sourcing, and then deploy. And he started



**Newly promoted Col. Jason Celletti's family, wife, Jennee, daughters, Milana and Finley, and stepson, Ellis Jones, pin his new rank on his uniform during a ceremony Aug. 28 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.**

War College and now has added a master's program. I know you're ready for all the challenges ahead in the aviation community. Continue to do the things which got you here and continue to take care of our aviation community."

Celletti thanked his family for their support.

"To my wife, Jennee, thank you for holding the house together while I'm gone and allowing me to do War College in the basement while chaos ensues on the main floor," he said, while also thanking his parents and children. "Most people get up here and thank

every person they've served with in their careers. That list continues to grow after 24 years of service. Thank you for all your support over the years."

Celletti offered a couple of "Jay'isms" to Soldiers and leaders in the Illinois National Guard.

"Carry on traditions while in the service," he said. "Legacy lends itself to pride. When Soldiers feel they are part of a tradition, they have more pride in the organization."

Celletti's second "Jay'ism" centered around resiliency for leaders.

“Leaders are faced with challenges but we tend to bottle them up to show strength, while it only eats deeper inside,” he said. “We must see resiliency through mentorship. If you don’t have a mentor, get one. I’ve had many mentors over the years to guide me where I’m at today.”

Celletti said no one makes the journey on their own.

“It takes a team, a family, and an organization,” he said. “Through tradition and resilience, leaders, Soldiers, and just good people can push the boundaries of greatness for the future.”

Celletti has served in multiple command and staff positions throughout his military service, including positions in the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade.

He has served in several positions within the Active Guard and Reserves program.

He deployed with 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment, Task Force Blackhorse from March 2008 to April 2009 as the personnel officer in Kosovo. In February 2023, Celletti deployed with



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, administers the oath of office to newly promoted Col. Jason Celletti, Illinois Army National Guard State Aviation Officer, during a promotion ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy, Aug. 28.**

1-106h Aviation to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility as the Task Force Commander of

Task Force Blackhorse, a multi-functional aviation rapid response task force.



***McDonough Meets with New Polish President Nawrocki***

Maj. Gen. Dan McDonough, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Air National Guard, met with the new Polish President Karol Nawrocki during Polish Armed Forces Day. They discussed the 32-year success of the Illinois National Guard’s State Partnership Program with the Polish military.

# Illinois Army National Guard Members Compete in TAG Match 2025 to Test, Enhance Marksmanship

**By Spc. Kristel Cordero**  
**139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment**

Illinois National Guard members gathered at the Marseilles Training Center, Illinois Aug. 18-22 to compete in the annual The Adjutant General's Match (TAG).

TAG Match 2025 is a marksmanship competition that highlights weapon proficiency and lethality within identified expert shooters across the entire Illinois Army National Guard.

The multi-day event brings together 48 Illinois National guardsmen that are selected based on their weapon qualification scores. The 48 soldiers are broken into 12 teams as they compete against one another with various pistol and rifle events. Soldiers engage in a variety of courses

spanning from pistol shooting at 15 to 30 yards to long-range rifle shooting out up to 400 yards.

"This is an opportunity for competitors from different battalions to not only compete but also train together and take those skills back to their units," said Staff Sgt. Sean Wilhour, a Small Arms Readiness Training Section (SARTS) instructor. "They're tested on their ability to shoot, move, and calculate all under stress."

Spc. Orlando Ramos, a combat medic with Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment said the competition gave him the opportunity to learn from more experienced Soldiers.

"I feel pretty privileged to be here honestly," said Ramos. "I feel

I'm more prepared with the weapon system, whether it be the M-17 or the M-4."

The Soldiers competed for Excellence in Competition (EIC) awards in both pistol and rifle events. The event culminated in awarding the prestigious Governor's Twenty tab to the top 10 percent of shooters with the highest overall scores.

Team Results (Overall) were as follows:

1st Place: Sgt. Jack Whitlock, Staff Sgt. Jon Welton, Sgt. Jeffery Welton, and Sgt. Andrew Whittman.

2nd Place: Staff Sgt. Aaron Kuhl, Staff Sgt. Aaron Wentler, Capt. Stephen Solum, and Staff Sgt Connor Fitzsimmons.

3rd Place: Staff Sgt. Dallas Stalkfleet, Sgt. Evan Nelson, Pvt. 1st Class Alexander Wiszowaty, and Pvt.



Illinois Army National Guardsman Spc. Orlando Ramos gets score during the annual TAG 25 competition at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, on Aug 18, 2025.

1st Class Preston Fugarino.

Individual Awards were as follows:

Overall Individual:

1st: Sgt. Jeffery Welton

2nd: Cpt. Stephen Solum

3rd: 1st Sgt. Andrew Johnson

Top Rifle:

1st: Staff Sgt. Jon Welton

2nd: Sgt. Jeffery Welton

3rd: Sgt. Jack Whitlock

Top Pistol:

1st: Sgt. Jeffery Welton

2nd: Cpt. Stephen Solum

3rd: Staff Sgt. Jon Welton

Top 2 Gun: Cpt. Stephen Solum

Top Special Zero: Staff Sgt. Jon

Welton

The following 15 Soldiers were awarded Governor's Twenty Badge: Staff Sgt. Jon Welton, Sgt. Jeffery Welton, Sgt. Jack Whitlock, Spc. Nick Leyva, Sgt. First Class Joshua Gooden, 1st Sgt. Andrew Johnson, Staff Sgt. Michael Bell, Sgt. Danielle Schafernak,

Sgt. 1st Class John Nussbaum, Capt. Bryton Krutsinger, Staff Sgt. Dallas Stalkfleet, Capt. Stephen Solum, Cadet Kamran Stringer, Sgt. Jose Nunez, and Staff Sgt. Connor Fitzimmons.

"This match really is about improving readiness across the force," said Staff Sgt. Sean Wilhour. "Whenever they go back to their unit, they can take these skills that they've learned here and apply it to their readiness for their individual units."



**Illinois Army National Guardsmen shoot pistols at the TAG team pistol event during the annual TAG 25 competition at the Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles on Aug 21, 2025.**



**Illinois Army National Guardsmen perform a group run during annual TAG 25 competition at the Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles on Aug 21, 2025.**

# Two childhood friends from Illinois Army National Guard compete together in ILNG TAG Match 2025

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

Two childhood friends from the Illinois Army National Guard competed together in the annual Illinois The Adjutant General 2025 shooting competition at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, Aug. 18-22.

TAG Match 2025 showcases selected Soldiers from units across the state competing for weapons proficiency.

Pvt. 1st Class Alexis Carmono and Pvt. 1st Class Braden Mostoff, both military police with the 933rd Military Police Company, attended this year's TAG Match 2025 competition. Carmono and Mostoff grew up in McHenry, Illinois, and have known each other since

eighth grade at McHenry Middle School. Navigating life together from middle school through high school, they shared the same goals and aspirations for their military careers.

Carmono signed his contract first in November 2023, and a week later Mostoff followed. With a shared dream of working in law enforcement, they pursued careers as military police to further themselves. They graduated from basic training and advanced individual training together. Currently, they serve in the same unit at the 933rd Military Police Company in Fort Sheridan.

"Going through the same shared experiences as basic training and RSP brought us closer together," Carmono said. "If we

need anything, we talk to each other and always have a shoulder to rely on."

This is their first year attending the TAG Match. Having been in the Army for less than two years, both have limited weapons experience. Pfc. Mostoff elaborates how it was a learning curve to become familiar with the weapons. Despite the challenges, the camaraderie and teamwork between the two allowed them to push each other and come out stronger as Soldiers.

"If one of us is shooting poorly, we hype one another up and give that confidence boost," Mostoff said. "We critique each other and that helps us shoot and perform better."



Illinois Army National Guardsmen Sgt. Daniel Priest, Spc. Christian Lis, Pvt. 1st Class Alexis Carmona, and Pvt. 1st Class Brayden Mosoff from the 933rd Military Police Company, reload ammunition for the Infantry Team Match event during the annual TAG Match 2025 competition at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, on Aug. 20. This competition is run to ensure weapon skills to promote utmost soldier readiness and lethality. Carmono and Mostoff are childhood friends who have known each other since eighth grade.

## ***Deputy State Air Surgeon Promoted to Colonel***

U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Daniel McDonough, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, Illinois Joint Force Headquarters, left, delivers the oath of office to Col. Aaron Boyer, the deputy state air surgeon, right, during Boyer's promotion ceremony Sept. 11, 2025, at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Peoria, Illinois. As deputy state air surgeon, Boyer is a medical leader within the state. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)



## ***U.S. Rep. Eric Sorensen Visits 182nd Airlift Wing***

Airmen from the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, pose for a photo with Maj. Gen. Daniel McDonough, Assistant Adjutant General-Air, and Rep. Eric Sorensen during Sorensen's visit to the wing in Peoria, Sept. 23. Sorensen was appointed to the House Armed Services Committee for the 119th Congress, along with assignments on the Subcommittee on Readiness and the Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)

# Greenview Soldier Pins on Colonel

An Illinois Army National Guard Soldier from Greenview was promoted to the rank of colonel in a ceremony Dec. 5 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

“This moment is all too surreal for me,” said Lt. Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard’s Military Personnel Officer, while thanking his family for their support. “Thank you to my family for all your love, support, and faithful understanding that although you didn’t volunteer to serve because I voluntold you, but nonetheless you had to bear the same uncertainty and struggles my 29 years of service have brought at you.”

Barton enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1996 as a Heavy Wheel Vehicle Mechanic

assigned to the 1644th Transportation Company in Rock Falls. He attained the rank of staff sergeant before receiving a direct commission in 2006. Throughout his career he has served in multiple command and staff positions including Commander, 1644th Transportation Company; Commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, and executive officer, 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

“Thank you to Kelly, Myleigh, Rhett, Bryer, and Scarlett, and the rest of the Barton family, for taking part in this momentous occasion,” said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. “You have a lot to be proud of in the service and accomplishments of literally one of the



**Newly promoted Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard Military Personnel Officer**



## ***126th Air Refueling Wing Hosts Dual Change of Command Ceremonies***

**Major Doria Holland, center, and Major Nancy Redmond, right, stand ready to assume command of the 126th Logistics Readiness Squadron and 126th Force Support Squadron, respectively, in a duel ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois Sept. 7.**

best officers I have served with.”

Williams said three things come to mind when describing Barton.

“Mike always places our Soldiers and their families above himself,” Williams said. “He is genuine. He is the same officer around junior enlisted Soldiers as he is our senior leaders. He does not change character based on the audience. He is true to himself as a leader because his number one priority is always our people.

“Some officers are proficient at both leadership and staff assignments,” Williams said. “Some are great at one or the other. The select few are great at both. Mike is that breed of officer. Mike, you continue being you because our people deserve great leadership.”

Barton said his time at the 1644th is the reason behind 29 years of service.

“My time there made me want to keep wearing the uniform,” he said. “It made me want to be a better Soldier and it taught me how to be a leader.”

He said he is truly grateful for the noncommissioned officers he served with, both as an enlisted Soldier and as an officer.

“The NCO Corps is the best and will always be anchored in my heart,” he said. “I’ve always said an NCO will be present at one hundred percent of training events or combat missions.”

Barton also thanked civilian employees.

“You all bring so much to bear which enables the success of the Illinois National Guard,” he said. “Without you what we do isn’t possible.”

Barton said leaders don’t get to decide their legacy in the organization.

“I don’t get to decide my legacy,” he said. “Those I served with or led along the way decide my legacy. I try to be a humble servant who got the people part right. I haven’t always gotten the people part right, but I’ve tried to every day.”

Barton credits his faith as his guiding light.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required,” he said. “From the one who has been entrusted much, more will be expected. Basically, if we’re given blessings, we’re expected to be servant leaders

and serve others.”

Barton said no one makes it to this point in their career without making mistakes and without receiving multiple chances.

“As leaders we all need to remember that in our approach with Soldiers,” he said. “It’s my ultimate responsibility to see them succeed. Success of the individual leads to the success of the team, squad, platoon, company, battalion, command, state, and ultimately our nation.”

He said leaders are entrusted with the nation’s greatest resources and that’s its people.

“They are the sons and daughters of the United States of America. Employ them, empower them, and hold them accountable, when necessary,” he said. “Do so however while giving your Soldiers the model of a firm, fair, and consistent leader.”

Barton urged fellow Soldiers to train to standards.

“The standard you walk by is the standard you set,” he said. “Don’t cut corners in training. If you cut corners in training, you may be inclined to cut corners in your greatest moment of need,” he said. “Don’t let cutting corners lead to a Soldier’s worst day in the Army.”

Barton said whether Soldiers realize it or not, they are ambassadors.

“You may not have wanted to be an ambassador, but you are,” he said. “As soon as you raised your right hand, you said I want to be an ambassador. You are an ambassador to the United States, to the U.S. Army, to the unit you serve, and lastly your name. Go out and do the right thing. Take care of yourself and your troops.”



### **VFW State Commander Visits TAG**

**Col. (ret.) Eugene Blackwell, the 2025-2026 Commander, Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), met with Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, at Camp Lincoln Sept. 23. During the meeting, the two leaders discussed ways the VFW and its Auxiliary could assist members of the Illinois National Guard and their families. Blackwell, of Frankfort, Illinois, served in the Illinois Army National Guard from 1983 until 2009 in various medical units, including the 108th Medical Battalion, the 508th Medical Company, as commander of the Health and Dental Clinic, and commander of the 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion (MMB). Blackwell deployed with the 108th MMB to Afghanistan in 2008 and served as an advisor to the Afghan Corps’ surgeon.**

# National Guard Officer Retires from Army After 21 Years, Continues Service with VFW

Maj. Jennifer Hillyer of Springfield retired after 21 years of military service to our state and nation in the Illinois Army National Guard in a Jan. 9 ceremony at the Northenders Veterans of Foreign Wars VFW Post 10302, where she now serves as Junior Vice Commander.

"She is always all about giving back to others," said Col. Jeff Hicks, the Illinois National Guard's Deputy United States Property and Fiscal Officer - Army, who presided over the retirement ceremony. "She digs deep within herself to do more."

Hillyer retired as the Deputy Supervisory Logistics Management Specialist for the U.S. Property and Fiscal Office at Illinois National Guard headquarters on Camp Lincoln. She started as an enlisted Soldier, rose to the rank of staff sergeant in the first part of her career, then commissioned and rose again through the ranks retiring as a field grade officer.

Hillyer deployed twice to Iraq during her career, as the Support Operations Transportation Officer assigned to the 232nd Combat Support Sustainment Battalion in 2020-2021 and as an NCO team leader with the 3637th Maintenance Company in 2007-2008. She held two company commands, commanding the Paris, Ill.-based 1544th Transportation

**Col. Jeff Hicks, the Deputy United States Property and Fiscal Officer Army, presents Maj. Jennifer Hillyer with a framed American Flag upon her retirement from the Illinois Army National Guard after 21 years of service.**

Co. and a company within the Rock Island Arsenal-based 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade.

"I feel indebted to the Soldiers. It is really about the people you served with," Hillyer said. "People say that being a commander is the best position in the Army - and it is." She said she loved putting the Army uniform on everyday and serving Soldiers.

Hicks presented Hillyer with the Meritorious Service Medal in recognition of her more than two decades of service. Hillyer continues to serve her community after retirement as the Junior Vice Commander of Northenders VFW Post 10302.

Hillyer thanked those she served with in the Illinois National Guard, retired and active, her "VFW family," and her family by blood and marriage - especially her parents and brother. "When I enlisted, you were so mad," she said. "But now you are so proud."



**Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Jennifer Hillyer (right) holds her friend, Sgt. 1st Class Misty Mesecher after Hillyer's retirement ceremony on Jan. 9 at the Northenders Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10302 in Springfield. Hillyer retired after 21 years of military service but continues to serve her community as the Junior Vice Commander of VFW Post 10302.**



# Grieco Family Honored During University of Illinois Military Appreciation Football Game

The family of fallen Illinois Army National Guard Soldier Staff Sgt. Kevin Grieco was honored in front of 68,000 fans during the University of Illinois' Fighting Illini Military Appreciation Football Game against Maryland, Nov. 14.

Staff Sgt. Grieco's daughter, Angeli, is a sophomore at the university studying interdisciplinary health sciences. She was two years old when her father was killed in action on October 27, 2008. He was a Soldier in the 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery serving in Baghlan, Afghanistan.

Joining Angeli on the field were her grandparents and her father's parents, Ralph and Linda Greico.

"We're very honored, for one thing, and very humbled that we are being selected to represent military families," Staff Sgt. Grieco's father, Ralph Grieco, told the Champaign News-Gazette.

Ralph Grieco, a retired U.S. Army colonel, said his son grew up as an "Army brat," but he initially joined the U.S. Navy.

"(He) carried that kind of leadership and devotion to the country through his high school years, so much so that prior to graduating from high school in Missouri, he early-enlisted in the Navy," Ralph Grieco told the newspaper. "He wanted to go into the Navy and see the world, and he did."

Kevin had been planning to apply for Officer Candidate School with the Illinois Army National Guard when his brigade, the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, was notified that they'd deploy to



**The family of fallen Illinois Army National Guard Soldier Staff Sgt. Kevin Grieco was honored during the University of Illinois' Fighting Illini Military Appreciation football game Nov. 14. Pictured, from left, are Grieco's mother, Linda; daughter, Angeli; and father, Ralph.**

Afghanistan as part of the largest deployment of the Illinois National Guard since World War II, Ralph Grieco told the newspaper.

Kevin decided to go, feeling he would be a better officer for having experienced it.

The 33rd IBCT deployed to Afghanistan from June to September 2008 as 38 separate force packages in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, according to the September-October 2011 Military Review article entitled "Bringing Order to

Brigade Reset."

The brigade reorganized into 44 police mentor teams, six embedded training teams, a counterinsurgency battalion, a force protection battalion, two companies of special purpose security forces, a logistics task force, a training advisory group, and a combined Joint task force headquarters. Almost 3,000 Illinois Soldiers deployed. Eighteen of those Soldiers lost their lives overseas.

# 198th CSSB Receives New Commander, Senior Enlisted Soldier During Ceremonies

## ***Reeder Assumes Command of 198th CSSB***

Lt. Col. Linden Allen relinquished command of the North Riverside-based 198th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion to Maj. (P) Benjamin Reeder during the unit's Change of Command Ceremony on Nov. 5.

Both officers are highly decorated combat Veterans.

Allen has deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Djibouti.

Reeder has deployed to Afghanistan and Egypt.

**At right, Maj. (P) Benjamin Reeder receives the guidon of the 198th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion from Col. Beth Roxworthy, Commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade during the change of command ceremony. (U.S. Army photos by Sgt. Andrea Roman, 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.)**



**Command Sgt. Maj. James Davis, the incoming senior enlisted leader for 198th CSSB receives the battalion's guidon during the change of responsibility ceremony.**

## ***Davis new Senior Enlisted Leader for 198th CSSB***

The 198th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) held a Change of Responsibility ceremony Aug. 2, transitioning from outgoing Command Sgt. Maj. Nickolaus Fordham to incoming Command Sgt. Maj. James Davis.

The 198th CSSB thanked Fordham for his two years of exceptional leadership and dedicated service to the battalion. During the ceremony, Fordham was inducted into the Order of Saint Christopher, awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, and presented with heartfelt gifts.

The battalion welcomed Davis and looks forward to his leadership.

# Illinois Army National Guard's Security Operations Officer Promoted to Major

Ten years after commissioning through the accelerated Officer Candidate School, Andrew Ducker was promoted to major in a ceremony at the Illinois State Military Museum, Springfield, Oct. 31.

"The minute you pin on major, there are expectations of you," said Col. Paul Metzdorff, Chief of Staff, Illinois Army National Guard. "Being a major is all about mastering the transition from the tactical level to the staff and operational level, but I have full faith and confidence that you're going to be an excellent staff officer."

Metzdorff said he has known Ducker well for about five years, having served together during COVID-19 operations.

Ducker enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 2007, transitioning to the U.S. Army and eventually the Illinois Army National Guard in 2013. He received his commission in 2015. He has served in progressive positions of leadership and serves as the Security Operations Officer in the Illinois National Guard.

Ducker thanked the noncommissioned officers he has served with for their support throughout the years.

"Thank you for training me, supporting me, and even pushing back when I got caught up with good ideas," he said. "I wouldn't be where I am or where I am headed without

your daily dedication."

He also thanked his fellow officers during the ceremony.

"When I look around, I see mentors and friends. I'm sure there were times you asked what was he thinking," he said. "But you stood by and helped shape me into the officer I am today."

Ducker thanked his family, including his wife Jill, for their support.

"To my kids, thank you for your smiles, your curiosity, for always missing me when I'm gone. The best part of coming home is seeing you come to the door cheering that dad's home and making everything I do worthwhile," he said. "Jill there are no words for how grateful I am for your patience and understanding. I know it's not always easy and my time away asks a lot of you. You never complain and always remind me how much I am missed. You stand by my side, not only as my wife, but as my partner and greatest motivation."



Col. Paul Metzdorff, Chief of Staff, Illinois Army National Guard, administers the oath of office to newly promoted Maj. Andrew Ducker, Security Cooperation Officer, Illinois National Guard, during a promotion ceremony Oct. 31 at the Illinois State Military Museum, Springfield.



Newly promoted Maj. Andrew Ducker's family, wife, Jill, and children, Gabriel, Isiah, Natalie and Maris, pin on new rank during a promotion ceremony Oct. 31 at the Illinois State Military Museum.

# Senior Enlisted Noncommissioned Officer Retires from Illinois Army National Guard

After serving more than 28 years in the Illinois Army National Guard, Sgt. Maj. Nicholaus Fordham retired from military service during a ceremony Oct. 3 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

Fordham, the Illinois Army National Guard's logistics senior enlisted advisor, enlisted as a supply specialist in 1997 and served in the 1644th Transportation Company, the 1144th Transportation Battalion, 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB), 65th Troop Command Brigade, 108th Sustainment Brigade, and the 198th CSSB.

As a senior NCO, Fordham served as a battalion command sergeant major, brigade support operations sergeant major, battalion operations noncommissioned officer in charge, brigade and battalion supply NCO, and most recently the logistics sergeant major for the Illinois Army National Guard.

"This is a super surreal moment for the Fordham family," said Lt. Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard's Military Personnel Officer, who served with Fordham in the 1644th Transportation Company. "Sergeant Major, you and I have been together for most of our careers. Here you are 20 years later with you retiring at the pinnacle of your career. There was no doubt you'd make sergeant major. I had hoped that you and I would command a battalion together. Sadly that wasn't in the cards."

Barton told family and friends that Fordham is a consummate professional who works hard.

"No one was going to outwork Nick ever," he said. "He always arrived early and stayed late, but still found that work-family balance. He was always steadfast in his decision-making process. He would take a stance, defend the stance if necessary, and then would execute the mission regardless of the decision."

Barton called Fordham "the Magic Man" for Fordham's ability to be one or two steps ahead of Barton's plans.



**Sgt. Maj. Nicholaus Fordham thanks friends and family for their support during a retirement ceremony Oct. 3 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield. Fordham retired after 28 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard.**

"I thought for years he had tapped or bugged my office, or possessed telepathic powers," he said. "I'd come up with a plan and when I went to him to discuss, he'd blurt it out and then hand me a binder."

Barton said Fordham's ability to anticipate requirements didn't stop at the unit level.

"That was your calling card your entire career," Barton said. "You've had a fantastic career and put your heart and soul into the mission and the Soldiers. As you walk away and hang up the uniform, you can say 'mission accomplished'."

Barton said the Illinois National Guard is a people first organization

and that as Soldiers retire, they don't get to decide what their legacy will be.

"From my foxhole, you got the people part right," Barton said. "You leave a legacy of hard work, dedication and excellence behind. I'm proud to say I've had the opportunity to serve with you. I'm humbled to share this stage with you on this momentous occasion, albeit with a tinge of sadness that my friend is going to hang up his uniform."

Fordham thanked his family, including wife Stephanie, for their support throughout his career.

"Without her support and the support of our children, I wouldn't be where I am today," he said. "We

have a lot of military members in our family. This is part of us. This is what we do."

Fordham thanked Barton for his friendship.

"We've been friends for a long time," he said. "I appreciate our valued conversations about work, career paths, and family. It was an honor working with you throughout the years."

Fordham said his career has been challenging, but overall successful.

"The experience I learned came from the company level positions," he said. "I've seen Soldiers step up with the spirit of teamwork to make the organization great for me."

Fordham said a leader's responsibility goes beyond the mission.

"Our job is to prepare the leaders who will come after us," he said. "We pass on what we've learned, mentor the next generation, and make sure others are ready to take our places when the time comes."

Fordham urged younger Soldiers to not wait for the perfect opportunity to lead.

"Leadership happens in a moment," he said. "Step forward, take on the hard jobs, push yourself beyond your comfort zone. Being nervous about a new position is a good thing. It means you care. It means you want to be successful. Use that tool to perfect your craft and be proficient in that job and your future jobs."

Fordham said it's with great gratitude and pride that he retires.

"I have gratitude for the people I've served with, and pride in what we've accomplished together," he said. "Take care of each other, train our future leaders and continue the legacy of the Illinois National Guard."



**Lt. Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard's Military Personnel Officer, presents Sgt. Maj. Nicholaus Fordham the Legion of Merit during a retirement ceremony Oct. 3 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.**

## Illinois Guard Member Takes Top Honors at Squad Designated Marksman Class

A Soldier from the Illinois Army National Guard was honored as the Distinguished Honor Graduate and Top Gun of Squad Designated Marksman (SDM) Class 25-006.

Spc. Joseph Stanley earned the titles after two weeks of intense training, and now is returning to his unit with advanced marksmanship skills, extended range, and the expertise to share with their peers.

**U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Franke**



# Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School Graduates 17 Leaders

Seventeen Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers graduated from the ILARNG Officer Candidate School during a ceremony at Heartland Community College's Astroth Community Education Center in Normal Aug. 17.

Fourteen Soldiers took the oath of office as newly-commissioned second lieutenants while three Soldiers chose to "hip pocket" their commissions and seek federal recognition at a later date.

Col. Shawn Nokes, commander, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), said he was honored and humbled to participate in the graduation and commissioning ceremony.

"It was 20 years ago I sat where you are today," he said. "This is merely a gate you will pass through. What you do in the beginning phase of your military career will be the foundation of who you are as a leader."

Nokes urged the second lieutenants to have fun in their new roles.

"If you're not having fun, then you're working and no one likes to work," he said. "There will be many challenges that will come with this position. I'm sure you are up for it. We have high expectations for you. What will your legacy be? You get to decide that with your leadership style, your actions, and your character. You will do great."

Nokes offered leadership recommendations to the ILNG's newest leaders.

"Be a servant leader. Leaders are about serving others. Rank worn by leaders are a symbol of servitude. Caring for Soldiers and families is a mission essential task for all leaders," he said. "A great leader is also empathetic and must care about the people they are assigned to lead."

Nokes said they will be expected to take initiative and to work as a team with their NCOs.

"A lack of orders is no excuse for inaction. Don't be afraid of failure. Embrace your chances and learn from it. The worst decision is no decision," he said. "Officers and noncommissioned officers complement each other. Their roles are different, but they do overlap. Work

with each other to ensure maximum effectiveness.

"As officers you will be expected to lead by example," he said. "On and off duty, good character is not negotiable."

Nokes said as leaders, they must exhibit loyalty.

"Loyalty to superiors is a must," he said. "Loyalty to subordinates is even more important."

Nokes said their legacy as an Army leader won't be measured by what they accomplish, but what their Soldiers accomplish.

"Your legacy will be those who you mentor and what they accomplish," he said. "Take great pride in taking care of your people."

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General-Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard spoke to the OCS graduates before administering the oath of office during the commissioning ceremony.

"August always marks a new Officer Candidate School graduating class," said Williams. "Twenty-five years ago, I sat in these same seats with a desire and passion to selflessly serve something greater than myself to make a difference and impact in the lives of our Soldiers and their families and to hopefully impact and make positive change in this organization and the U.S. Army as a whole."

Williams told the OCS graduates that regardless of why they joined or made a commitment to become a commissioned officer, the output of the decision is the same.

"It doesn't matter why you made the decision to join or become a commissioned officer, it's about the Soldiers you're about to care for and lead," Williams said. "There is no greater responsibility than leading the greatest single resource in the United States of America and that is our service members."

Williams offered advice to the newly commissioned officers.

"Know your craft within your branch and know your craft as a Soldier," he said. "You will be expected to impart that wisdom on our Soldiers. They deserve your best leadership all the time.

"Listen to your noncommissioned officers. They have a ton of experience," Williams said. "There are noncommissioned officers ready to commission in the front row. I was very proud to be a pre-seasoned NCO before I commissioned. But for about the first 90 days when I got to my first duty assignment, I shut up and listened to the NCO Corps. They are the ones with your Soldiers intently following out the orders you or your company command are going to give your Soldiers."

Williams urged the graduates to work their ideas through the NCOs.

"Your successes as a lieutenant are their successes," he said. "The failures you own but the successes are the greater good. They'll never steer you wrong. Even today as a general officer, I still make no decision on behalf of the Illinois Army National Guard without our NCOs and Warrant Officers and their sage advice."

Williams told them to lead from the front in all they do.

"Get the people part right in all you do. You can be the most technically and tactically proficient officer in the history of the United States, and know the regulations inside and out, but if you can't get the people part right, you're not a good officer," he said. "Start with getting the people part right. If you're leading passionately and care about our people, everything else will take care of itself."

Williams said he is proud of the Soldiers' accomplishments.

"Go to your units with an eagerness to excel and most of all an eagerness to lead and serve our people," he said. "I look forward to seeing many great things from each of you in the future. You are the future of the organization. Ten thousand Soldiers are waiting for your leadership and waiting for you to go do great things with them. I look forward to the next chapter in your career."

Class 70-25 is the 70th class to graduate from the 129th's Officer Candidate Program, which transforms enlisted noncommissioned officers and qualified civilians into U.S. Army officers.

The newly commissioned second lieutenants are:

- 2nd Lt. Cameron Cotterman of Bloomington
- 2nd Lt. Michael Deliberto of Wheaton
- 2nd Lt. Amy Feher of Mahomet
- 2nd Lt. Christina Fiorentino of Chicago
- 2nd Lt. John Gordan of Downers Grove
- 2nd Lt. Joseph Grant of Columbia
- 2nd Lt. Benjamin Hunt of Chicago
- 2nd Lt. Drennen Kessinger of Marine



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Cameron Cotterman of Bloomington with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Christina Fiorentino of Chicago with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**

- 2nd Lt. Irwin Leon-Cervantes of Villa Park
  - 2nd Lt. Parker Meads of Shiloh
  - 2nd Lt. Linda Mora of Chicago
  - 2nd Lt. Maggie Mui of Chicago
  - 2nd Lt. Matthew Rasmussen of Oak Lawn
  - 2nd Lt. John Winkler of Alton
- Graduates choosing to “hip-pocket” their commissions and seek federal recognition as Army officers at a later date are:
- Staff Sgt. Colton Grisham of Glen Carbon
  - Staff Sgt. Skye McEstes of Woodstock
  - Staff Sgt. Lucero Zempoaltecatl of Joliet



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Michael Deliberto of Wheaton with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. John Gordan of Downers Grove with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**

- Class 70-25 awards went to:
- 2nd Lt. Amy Feher of Mahomet was awarded the Prestigious Maj. Gen. Edgar C. Erickson Trophy as the Distinguished Honor Graduate of Class 70-25. She was presented with an Army Commendation Medal. She also earned the Class 70-25 Academic Award and Physical Fitness Award.
  - Staff Sgt. Skye McEstes of Woodstock was the 2nd Honor Graduate. She was presented an Army Achievement Medal.
  - 2nd Lt. John Gordan of Downers Grove was the 3rd Honor Graduate. He also earned the Class 70-25 Academic Award. He was presented an Army Achievement Medal.



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Amy Feher of Mahomet with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Joseph Grant of Columbia with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Staff Sgt. Colton Grisham of Glen Carbon with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Benjamin Hunt of Chicago with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Drennen Kessinger of Marine with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Irwin Leon-Cervantes of Villa Park with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Staff Sgt. Skye McEstes of Woodstock with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Parker Meads of Shiloh with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Linda Mora of Chicago with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Maggie Mui of Chicago with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**

*U.S. Army photos  
by Barbara Wilson,  
Illinois National Guard  
Public Affairs Office*



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. Matthew Rasmussen of Oak Lawn with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents 2nd Lt. John Winkler of Alton with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Staff Sgt. Lucero Zempoaltecatl of Joliet with a certificate of completion of the Officer Candidate School.**

## Five Soldiers Inducted into OCS Hall of Fame

Five Soldiers were inducted into the Illinois Army National Guard's Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame in a ceremony Aug. 17 at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois.

"Congratulations to our OCS Hall of Fame inductees," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army, and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "This induction is a testament to who you are as a leader. It is very difficult to get to this stage in your career. Your photo displayed on the Hall of Fame wall is a testament of time to show those in the front row this is a great honor. Take care of people. Lead from the front and one day after you go through battalion command, you can get on that wall as well.

"To our inductees, your journey is not over," he said. "Continue to earn your spot on the wall by taking care of our people."

Inducted were:

- Lt. Col. Miguel Cisneros, Class 46-01, who enlisted as a Track Vehicle Mechanic in October 1997. He commissioned in 2002 as an Ordnance Officer. Previous positions include Senior Advisor in the Afghan Ministry of Interior and Installation Management Command-Europe Liaison Officer to V Corps. He has deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Freedom Sentinel, and Operation Atlantic Resolve. He has served for 27 years and is the Executive Officer for U.S. Army Garrison-Poland as a Foreign Area Officer.

- Col. Edgardo Pratsreyes, Class 47-02, who enlisted as a Cannon Crew Member in November 1991. He commissioned in 2003 as a Transportation Officer. Previous positions include Commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 108th Sustainment Brigade,

Support Operations Officer, 108th Sustainment Brigade, and Battalion Commander, 380th Quartermaster Battalion. He deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004-2005 and Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014. Col. Pratsreyes has served for 33 years and is the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4 416th Theater Engineer Command as a logistics officer.

- Lt. Col. Aleida Gonzalez, Class 47A-02, who enlisted in November 1998 as a Personnel Administration Specialist. She commissioned in 2003 as a Military Intelligence Officer. Previous positions include Politico-Military Advisory, Joint Staff, Joint Force Headquarters - Illinois National Guard, Brigade S-2, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, Policy Advisory, Army National Guard G-2, Investigator, National Guard Bureau, CJ2X Officer in Charge, Task Force Phoenix, Afghanistan. She deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and to Kosovo in support of Kosovo Forces. She has served for 26 years and is the executive officer of the 65th Troop Command Brigade as a military intelligence officer. She will be taking command of the 217th Intelligence and Electronic Warfare Battalion when it activates in 2026.

- Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth, Class 48-03, who enlisted in January 1998 as an infantryman. He commissioned in 2004 as a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Officer. He has served as Commander, HHC, 232nd Combat Support Sustainment Battalion, Team Leader 5th WMD CST, Executive Officer, 232nd CSSB, OIC 5th CERFP, Brigade OIC, 404th MEB, and Battalion Commander, 44th Chemical Battalion. He deployed in support of Operation Southern Watch, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Freedom Sentinel. He has served for 27 years and is the Deputy G1

for Joint Force Headquarters – Illinois as a CBRN officer.

- Lt. Col. Kyle Scifert, Class 52-07, who enlisted in September 1993 as an infantryman. He commissioned in 2008 as a Military Police Officer. He has served as Commander, 33rd Military Police Battalion, Operations Officer, 404th MEB, Commander Company B, 2nd Battalion, 129th Regiment (Regional Training

Institute). He deployed to Iraq in 2003-2004 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Afghanistan in 2011-2012 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, and Djibouti (CJTF-HOA) in 2022. He is assigned to JFHQ-IL as a Military Police officer having recently graduated from the U.S. Army War College.

To be inducted into the Hall of Fame, each inductee must be a

graduate of the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) OCS Program, attain the rank of lieutenant colonel while serving on active duty or in an active National Guard or Reserve status, be recommended by the Illinois Army National Guard OCS Hall of Fame Board, and confirmed by the Commander of the 129th RTI for outstanding service.



**Lt. Col. Miguel Cisneros, Class 46-01.**



**Col. Edgardo Pratsreyes, Class 47-02.**



**Lt. Col. Aleida Gonzalez, Class 47A-02.**



**Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth, Class 48-03.**



**Lt. Col. Kyle Scifert, Class 52-07.**

*U.S. Army photos by  
Barbara Wilson,  
Illinois National Guard  
Public Affairs Office*



**The 144th Army Band performs during the graduation ceremony.**

# Riding Inducted into Audie Murphy Club

Sgt. Weston Riding, who is assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, was inducted into the Sgt. Audie Murphy Club on Nov. 1.

He was one of eight noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who were selected within the 42nd Infantry Division Command for this prestigious award. The Sergeant Audie Murphy Club (SAMC) is an organization within the U.S. Army that recognizes NCOs who demonstrate exceptional leadership, military expertise, and dedication to the Army's Values.

Established in 1986, the SAMC is named after Audie Murphy, one of the most decorated soldiers in American military history. Murphy's heroism during World War II, combined with his exemplary leadership and integrity, serves as the model for those selected for the club. Membership in the SAMC is a symbol of an NCO's commitment to excellence, and the club's members are held to the highest standards of conduct and



**Sgt. Weston Riding, who is assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, was inducted into the Sgt. Audie Murphy Club on Nov. 1.**

performance.

To be nominated for membership in the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club, an NCO must first meet a series of eligibility requirements. Candidates

must be in the rank of sergeant or above and have completed the required professional military education courses for their rank.

Once nominated, candidates undergo a selection process that includes a formal board evaluation. The SAMC board assesses candidates on their knowledge of Army regulations, tactics, leadership principles, and general military proficiency.

In addition to their technical knowledge, candidates are evaluated on their leadership abilities, their potential for future leadership roles, and their commitment to the welfare of soldiers.

They must also demonstrate a willingness to go above and beyond in mentoring junior soldiers and contributing to the unit's mission. The selection process is rigorous and challenging, with only the best NCOs earning membership.



**Sgt. Weston Riding, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, was one of eight Soldiers inducted into the Sgt. Audie Murphy Club.**

# McEstes leads with grit and vision

**Story by Pfc. Brianna Castilla  
122nd Theater Public Affairs  
Support Element**

From enlisted soldier to officer candidate, Skye McEstes has always been driven by a desire to do more.

A Soldier with the Illinois Army National Guard, she is now in Phase III of Officer Candidate School (OCS) with the 2nd Battalion, 205th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, Washington National Guard, on the precipice of becoming a second lieutenant.

OCS is a rigorous leadership training program. It is designed to prepare individuals to become commissioned officers who are ready to lead soldiers, make decisions under pressure, and uphold the values and responsibilities of the officer corps.

"I'm super excited," McEstes said, who was a staff sergeant before entering the program. "This is the next step in my career."

With nearly a decade of service, including roles as a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) specialist and supply specialist, McEstes discovered a new purpose while mobilizing with an aviation unit. That experience inspired her to pursue a commission, with a clear goal of becoming an aviator and leading soldiers.

"I went Active Guard Reserve, earning 90 credits, took online classes, and earned a bachelor's degree in leadership essentials through Southern New Hampshire University to be accepted into OCS," McEstes said. "I hope to become an aviator after this, go to flight school, and lead soldiers below me. It's super exciting."

In the high-stress environment of OCS, where every move is evaluated, McEstes leads with purpose and precision, grounded in a positive attitude that lifts those around her, making her a standout candidate among her peers. OCS hasn't just sharpened her tactical skills; it has reshaped her entire outlook on



**U.S. Army Officer Candidate Skye McEstes, with the Illinois National Guard, laughs with her platoon during Officer Candidate School (OCS) Phase III at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., Aug. 3. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Bianca Hayden)**

leadership, confidence, and purpose. For McEstes, the experience hasn't been easy. However, that's part of what makes it meaningful.

"I thought it was another challenge out there, and I didn't think I could do it," McEstes said. "It's always a little self-doubt. But it's an amazing program, and I am thoroughly impressed. I knew it was going to be hard, but to see how it's developed these Soldiers along the way is outstanding. I think it's an honor to earn your butter bar this way rather than flip a switch."

As an NCO, she knew how to lead at a squad level. However, OCS introduced a new scale of responsibility. Still, she stepped up with confidence, drawing on her experience and humility.

"This program gave me the push I needed," McEstes said. "I know I can lead all of them, from different backgrounds, with language barriers, experience gaps, you name it. It's an honor."

For McEstes, rank is incidental. The person behind it is what matters.

Whether she is in uniform as a full-time active guard reserve supply non-commissioned officer, mentoring peers in OCS, or preparing for her next role as a commissioned officer, she leads through genuine connection.

"If you're going to do the right thing and put Soldiers ahead of you and make sure their welfare and the mission is done, you are good to go," McEstes said.

Her leadership style is deeply relational. It's about knowing your people, their stories, their struggles, their strengths, and showing up for them every time.

"I'm not an NCO without them," she said. "I'm not a leader without them. If I'm not taking care of my Soldiers, I'm doing it wrong."

While McEstes speaks humbly about her leadership growth, those around her have witnessed something exceptional. Capt. Christopher Rothwell, a platoon trainer at OCS responsible for evaluating and mentoring officer candidates, shared high praise for McEstes's performance and leadership style.

“McEstes’s unique attitude is the definition of resilience,” Rothwell said, “A lot of the officer candidates aren’t previously enlisted and have never been in a field environment where they are evaluated. It can be very stressful,” he said, “ But her resilient attitude and contagious positivity have helped her squad get through, which is the definition of leadership. She excels at critical thinking, which is something that is not common. It’s a very important skill for an officer.”

Sgt. 1st Class Austin Hiatt, another platoon instructor, provides deeper insight into McEstes’s character.

She offers approachability while still being able to exercise her authority,” he said. “She is in a mentorship stage where she can take constructive feedback and apply it in a high-stress environment. Her ability to lead is unmatched, and she can think on the fly while showing respect toward her squad, which garners trust.”

In today’s Army, leadership isn’t just about giving orders – it’s about explaining why. Hiatt emphasized that younger Soldiers aren’t satisfied with blind obedience. They want purpose and context.

“The why matters,” Hiatt said. “There are different generations, and the newer generation likes to know the why more than ever. McEstes can do that. Here’s the mission, here’s the purpose, here’s the end state, and here’s why we are doing this.”

Hiatt described her as someone who embodies the Army’s evolving ethos – mission first, people always – noting that her ability to lead with purpose and personality makes her stand out.

“Humor goes a long way in the Army,” Hiatt said. “McEstes uses it in a way that aligns with the Army values and garners respect.”

McEstes offers a message not just for future officers, but for anyone standing at the edge of uncertainty. She believes growth begins with risk. It means choosing challenge over comfort, and stepping forward even when you don’t feel ready. It means recognizing that fear isn’t a stop sign, but a signal that something important is ahead.

“Take the leap,” McEstes said. “Take the challenge, don’t stay back. You never know your capabilities unless you push yourself.”



**U.S. Army Officer Candidate Skye McEstes, with the Illinois National Guard, prepares to advance her fighting position while taking part in a platoon situational training exercise during Officer Candidate School (OCS) Phase III at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., Aug. 5. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Bianca Hayden)**

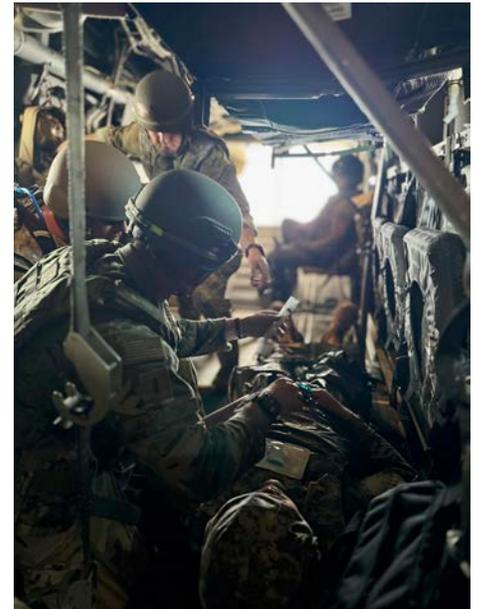


**U.S. Army Officer Candidate Skye McEstes, with the Illinois National Guard, fires an M4 carbine, suppressing the simulated enemy, as part of a platoon situational training exercise during Officer Candidate School (OCS) Phase III at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., Aug 5. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Reyfield Betz)**

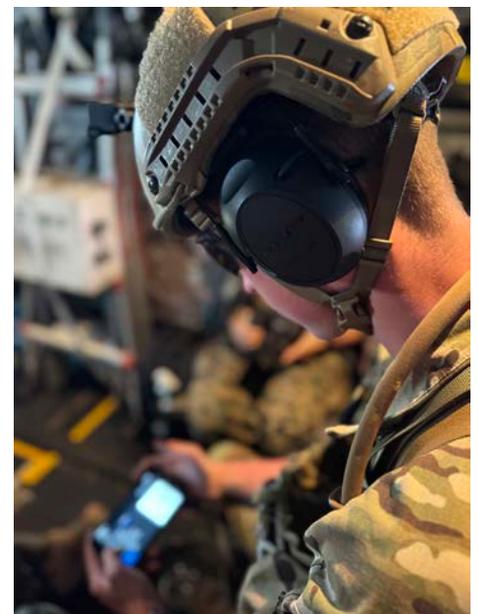
# 182nd Airlift Wing Tests Operational Medicine Innovation During Joint Exercise with Marines



An Air Force aerospace medical technician with 182nd Medical Group, 182nd Airlift Wing, documents casualty evacuation care using the Battlefield Assisted Trauma Distributed Observation Kit-Joint (BATDOK-J) during an Air Force-Marine Corps Joint Medical Training Exercise on Aug. 12. The exercise, involving 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) and the 182nd Medical Group, 182nd Airlift Wing, simulated combat casualty care and medical evacuation from Role 1 to Role 2. The exercise enhanced interoperability, operational readiness and supported Navy Medicine's goal of delivering agile medical units through modern clinical information systems like the Battlefield Assisted Trauma Distributed Observation Kit-Joint (BATDOK-J) produced by the Joint Operational Medical Information System (JOMIS) Program Management Office (PMO). The BATDOK-J, a mobile application within the JOMIS ecosystem, facilitates real-time patient data transfer from the point of injury. (Courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps)



An Air Force aerospace medical technician with 182nd Medical Group, 182nd Airlift Wing, provides medical treatment to a simulated patient in an MV-22 Osprey.



An Air Force aerospace medical technician with 182nd Medical Group, 182nd Airlift Wing, reviews patient data transferred from the point of injury using the Battlefield Assisted Trauma Distributed Observation Kit-Joint (BATDOK-J) on Aug. 12.

# Reavis Earns Rising Eagle Award at NGAUS

Illinois Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 2 Gary Reavis, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, received the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) Rising Eagle Award for Warrant Officers at the recent NGAUS Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The justification for the award read that Reavis “is a model of a servant leader who has dedicated himself to both his community and the Army National Guard. In his time as a Warrant Officer, Chief Reavis has made a significant impact on all organizations where he has served, advancing the Maintenance readiness of organizations at multiple echelons.

He has chosen to leverage his military experience serving as a Federal Technician with the ILARNG in the G4, and is now having that same impact at the state level. Chief Reavis has implemented new mission command instruments to provide in depth directorate level awareness of maintenance requirements and resources, and is leveraging technology to provide the best placement of finite resources against those requirements.

He is advancing the business practices of the organization in a way that will have generational impacts. Additionally, when not serving in uniform, he has committed his personal time to serving the needs of his community in multiple volunteer capacities. He has advanced the interests of farmers across Illinois through his work on farm boards, and is active in veterans and civic organizations across central Illinois.

His tireless efforts have made him an indispensable member of his community, and had an impact on countless citizens across the state. He now also serves on the board for the National Guard Association of Illinois as the Secretary, advancing the interests of National Guard service members as well.”

**Right, Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, congratulates Chief Warrant Officer 2 Gary Reavis, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, for receiving the National Guard Association of the United States’ Rising Eagle Award.**



**Chief Warrant Officer 5 Brian Searcy, the eighth command chief warrant officer of the Army National Guard presents Chief Warrant Officer 2 Gary Reavis, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, with the National Guard Association of the United States Rising Eagle Award at the organization’s convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.**





## 126th ARW Brings Rodeo to Town

Airmen from the Illinois Air National Guard's 126th Air Refueling Wing train with the wing's Security Forces Squadron during an organization-wide training at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 2.

Designated the Mission Support Group Rodeo, the training was to help familiarize wing members with deployment specific skillsets.

Training included base erection and protection as well as deployed operations, armed combat skills, and specific tasks and competencies to increase efficiency and preparedness in a deployed environment. (Illinois Air National Guard photos by Staff Sgt. Aaron Rodriguez, 126th Air Refueling Wing Public Affairs)

# 126th ARW Honors Airmen Accomplishments



U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Ryan Shireman, 108th Air Refueling Squadron, pilot, and Maj. Beste Shireman, 126 Operations Support Squadron, receive KC-135 Stratotanker tails for their retirement from the 126th Operations Group in O'Fallon, Illinois, Sept. 5, 2025. The husband wife team held simultaneous retirement ceremonies at the O'Fallon VFW.



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Ryan Mullins, 126th Air Refueling Wing, A Staff, poses with his wife and children after being promoted to Master Sergeant at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Sept. 7, 2025. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Ces White)



Above, Chief Master Sgt. Nichole Neal, left, 126th Operations Group, chief, welcomes Chief Master Sgt. Aaron Arseo, 126th Communications Flight, chief, into the 126th Chiefs group at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Sept. 6. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech Sgt. Ariana Freeman)



Right, U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Aaron Arseo's, 126th Communications Flight, senior enlisted leader, family tacks on his new rank during his promotion ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Sept. 6. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech Sgt. Ariana Freeman)

# Illinois National Guard Participates in Gold Star Families' Fallen Heroes Tree Lighting

The Illinois National Guard participated in the American Gold Star Families' Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor Tree Lighting Ceremony on Nov. 17, at Central Illinois Regional Airport in Bloomington.

America's Gold Star Families, Inc. sponsors the Fallen Heroes tree of Honor Ceremonies.

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, served as a speaker at the event along with

Miss Kankakee Teen 2025 and Eagle Scout, Alexis McCullough, whose father, Army Col. Mark R. McCullough, died while serving his nation on Oct. 16, 2019.

"I am here today proudly representing my organization, the U.S. Army, our nation, this uniform and all that it stands for, and the oath that we all took to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies. My support to this event this evening and other events like it, is more than just

my duty as an Army officer – it is personal," Williams said. "You see, for me personally, September 17, October 27, and February 24 will always be etched in my mind. As a company commander in Afghanistan, those are the days we lost four incredible Soldiers from our unit. Each year those are days of reflection for the amazing Soldiers that we lost, and of the incredible Gold Star Families that they came from. The memories of the fallen pop into our minds all the time. When it happens, we take a few moments to savor that memory. Often we quietly keep it to ourselves and continue with our day. Events like this evening are our chance to share our memories of these incredible warriors who gave their lives in defense of our nation. And this evening is our chance to remind our Gold Star Families that we are always here for them...as we promised, and as President Abraham Lincoln ordered us to when he said, 'care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.' Our mission to remember the fallen and to support their families never ends, and we will never forget!"

McCullough spoke about the impact her father had and continues to have on her life.

"Six years ago my father unexpectedly passed away in October of 2019 while serving our country. I was only 11 when I realized the price of our freedom. My dad, (Col.) Mark McCullough, enlisted at age 18 and served in the Army until he passed away at the age of 51. He taught me the meaning of resilience and has been the inspiration behind my own call to service through Boy Scouts as



**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, affixes an ornament honoring a fallen service member on the tree with members of Bloomington Boy Scout Troop 19 during the American Gold Star Families' Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor Tree Lighting Ceremony on Monday, Nov. 17, at Central Illinois Regional Airport in Bloomington, Ill. Williams served as a speaker during the event.**

an Eagle Scout and the Miss America Organization as I advocate for others," she said. "Missing him doesn't take away the joy he gave me. Instead, it reminds me of how lucky I was to be his daughter and how deeply he loved his family and his country. Being a Gold Star daughter has shaped my life in ways I didn't expect. It has given me a story that is painful but also powerful. It has taught me courage, resilience, and the importance of keeping legacies alive. My dad's service and sacrifice are not just parts of history, they are parts of me as an individual as well. Part of honoring him means sharing the love and that pride I have for our country with others, especially during moments like tonight."

McCullough spoke of the significance of the holiday tree lighting to the families of fallen service members. "Tonight, as we light this tree, we aren't just celebrating the Christmas season. We are honoring our fallen heroes and the families who continue to carry their stories. We acknowledge both the sorrow of their absence and the beauty of their love. And we choose together, to let their light live on."

Central Illinois Regional Airport hosted the event. The U.S. Army Survivor Outreach Services, Gold Star Mission, American Legion Post 635 in Normal and Post 56 in Bloomington, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 454 in Bloomington, and Boy Scout Troop 19 in Bloomington all assisted with the ceremony.



**U.S. Army Survivor Outreach Services Coordinator Michelle Rutherford affixes an ornament honoring a fallen service member to the tree during the American Gold Star Families' Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor Tree Lighting Ceremony.**



**Gold Star parents Vonda and Kevin Rodgers of Bloomington, Ill., affix an ornament with the name of their son, U.S. Army Sgt. Joshua P. Rodgers, during the American Gold Star Families' Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor Tree Lighting Ceremony at Central Illinois Regional Airport in Bloomington, Ill. Sgt. Rodgers who was killed April 27, 2017 fighting ISIS in the Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan.**

# 1st Division Museum Honors Fallen Heroes

The weather outside was frightful, but the tree lighting honoring Fallen Heroes was delightful. The 1st Division Museum at Cantigny in Wheaton hosted a holiday tree lighting honoring fallen Service Members on Nov. 29.

The event was arranged by Survivor Outreach Services coordinator and “bonus” mother of the Illinois Army National Guard’s Sgt. Joshua Harris, Jean Harris, with Jessica Waszak, the curator of the museum and sister of the Illinois Air National Guard’s Staff Sgt. Jacob Frazier.

Sgt. Harris was killed in action on Sept. 17, 2008 while deployed to Afghanistan with the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

Staff Sgt. Frazier, of the 182nd Airlift Wing, was killed in action on March 29, 2003 in southern Afghanistan while serving as a Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) member with U.S. Special Forces.

Also joining the event was the mother of U.S. Army Pfc. Gunnar Hotchkin, Chris Hotchkin; Sgt.



Harris’ sister Kalyn, and retired Illinois Army National Guard Chaplain Robert Geaschel. Pfc. Hotchkin was killed in action on June 16, 2010 while serving in North Kunduz, Afghanistan.



*U.S. Army photos by  
Sgt. Gabriel Rivera, 139th Mobile  
Public Affairs Detachment*



# 182nd Airlift Wing Supports Fallen Heroes Tree Ceremony, Honors Gold Star Families

The 182nd Airlift Wing supported the meaningful work of Gold Star Families.

Col. Brandon Retherford, 182nd Operations Group commander, spoke at the Nov. 15 Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor Ceremony, hosted at the Peoria Riverfront Museum.

His presence, and the words shared, were deeply impactful and supported the mission to provide honor, hope, and healing to our Gold Star Families.

The Illinois National Guard leadership is honored to personally recognize the service and sacrifice of our heroes and their families.

America's Gold Star Families, Inc. sponsored this inspiring event.



The family of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Paul Smith, Illinois National Guard, points to his ornament on the tree during the Gold Star Family Tree of Honor lighting ceremony in Peoria, Illinois, Nov. 15, 2025. Staff Sgt. Smith of Peoria, Illinois, was killed in action June 19, 2009, in Kandahar, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Jacob Moushon)



U.S. Air Force Col. Brandon Retherford, the commander of the 182nd Operations Group, Illinois Air National Guard, speaks during the Gold Star Family Tree of Honor lighting ceremony in Peoria, Nov. 15. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Jacob Moushon)



Left, Kim Smith, the wife of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Paul Smith, Illinois National Guard, speaks to U.S. Air Force Col. Brandon Retherford, the commander of the 182nd Operations Group, Illinois Air National Guard, during the Gold Star Family Tree of Honor lighting ceremony in Peoria, Illinois, Nov. 15. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by 2nd Lt. Jacob Moushon)

# IDVA Holds Gold Star Families Christmas Tree Lighting, Decorating Ceremony in Springfield

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs held its annual Gold Star Families Christmas Tree Lighting and Decorating ceremony at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum Dec. 8.

“Light, love and hope are appropriate symbols for honoring our Gold Star families,” said

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard. “Honoring our fallen heroes together is a reminder to us all that our memories, and our mourning are shared experiences. Today is a great day to remember their personalities, their voices, and their warmth.”

Several Illinois Gold Star families joined Terry Prince, Director, IDVA, and Boyd in placing ornaments honoring Illinois’ fallen following the official lighting.

The tree will remain on display through the end of the year to honor Illinois’ fallen and pay tribute to their families.



**Sgt. Gerrick D. Smith is one of the Illinois National Guard’s fallen service members from the Global War on Terrorism.**



**Above, Seeley Smith, sister of fallen Illinois Army National Guard Sgt. Gerrick Smith, places an ornament in memory of a fallen service member with Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director Terry Prince during the Gold Star Families Christmas Tree lighting ceremony at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Dec. 8.**



**Left, Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, talks about honoring the memories of Illinois’ fallen service members.**

# Illinois National Guard Honors Illinois' Fallen During Gold Star Mother's Day Luncheon

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, was honored to join Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director Terry Prince at IDVA's Gold Star Mothers' Day Lunch, Sept. 28 in Union Square Park in Springfield.

Lincoln's ChalleNGe Academy and Survivor Outreach Services also supported the annual event for our the Families of our Fallen Warriors.



# Headquarters and Support Company Honors Outgoing Commander, Welcomes New Leader

Capt. Joshua Thompson of Marshall, Missouri, relinquished command of the Headquarters and Support Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade to Capt. Matthew Selvaggio of Springfield, Illinois, at Heartland Community College, Normal, Illinois, Aug. 16.

Thompson joined the U.S. Army Reserves in 2005 as a military policeman. He was commissioned in 2008, serving as a platoon leader and executive officer with the 603rd Military Police Company, and as the unit's commander from 2013 to 2015. Thompson joined the Illinois National Guard in 2022, taking command of the HSC, 404th MEB the following year.

Thompson's awards include the Bronze Star Medal, NATO/ISAF Medal and Afghanistan Campaign Medal with one campaign star. His next assignment will be with the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

After giving his parting words to his Soldiers, Thompson was presented with the Army Commendation Medal by Col. David Helfrich, commander of the 404th MEB, and a special plaque from the unit to remember his time as company commander.

Selvaggio joined the Illinois National Guard in 2016. His previous assignments include an advisor in Ukraine from 2020 to 2021, the commander of the 1886th Engineer Detachment, and operations officer and executive officer of the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion.

Selvaggio's awards include the Army Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal and Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal.



**Col. David Helfrich, Commander, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, passes the Headquarters and Support Company, 404th MEB, guidon to incoming commander Capt. Matthew Selvaggio during the August Change of Command ceremony.**



**Col. David Helfrich, Commander, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, presents the Army Commendation Medal to Capt. Joshua Thompson, outgoing commander of Headquarters and Support Company, 404th MEB, during the Change of Command ceremony.**

# Leaving Their Mark

The 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron created a crew chief heritage wall for crew chiefs who served in the 126th AMXS and 906th Air Refueling Squadron. The wall features signatures and nose art. At right, U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Cody Carlson, 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is the first to sign the crew chief heritage wall at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 1. Below left, U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Landen Lescoe, 906th Air Refueling Squadron, crew chief, signs the 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chief heritage wall. Below right, U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Derek Jones, 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, crew chief, signs the squadrons heritage wall. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Senior Master Sgt. Bri-an Ellison)



# An old-fashioned tail raisin'!

126th Maintenance Squadron Airmen with the help of civilian contractors placed a tail at the entrance to the 126th Air Refueling Wing headquarters building at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug, 14, 2025. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)





# 182nd Airlift Wing exercises wartime readiness skills at Combat Readiness Inspection



Force protection personnel with the 182nd Security Forces Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, and the Base Defense Team defend the base from a ground attack during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) exercise scenario at Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 6



Airmen with 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, exercise Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) skills during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) exercise scenario at Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 6, 2025. The Air Mobility Command Inspector General's office reported the wing's inspection as a "best seen to date benchmark." (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)



U.S. Air Force Maj. Brooke Davis of Detachment 1, 182nd Medical Group, Illinois Air National Guard, evaluates Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) skills during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) exercise scenario in Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 6,



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Noah Hackbart, a Base Defense Operations Center (BDOC) controller with the 182nd Security Forces Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, coordinates with his teammates while in MOPP 4 during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) in Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 6,



U.S. Air National Guard, 126th Air Refueling Wing , flight-line ground crew directs the parking of a KC-135 Stratotanker at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Oct. 31, 2025. The two orange marshaling wands are slowly brought closer together to instruct the flight crew to slowly approach and stop in a aircraft parking spot. (U.S. National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Aaron Rodriguez)

## 126th ARW Returns Home from Training Exercise

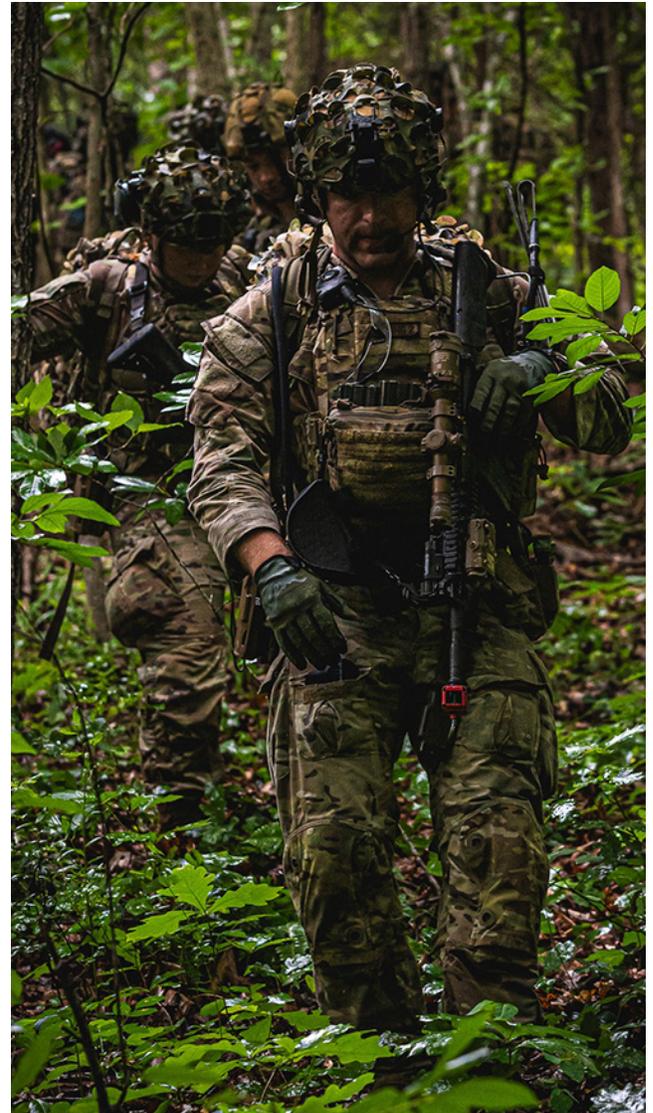
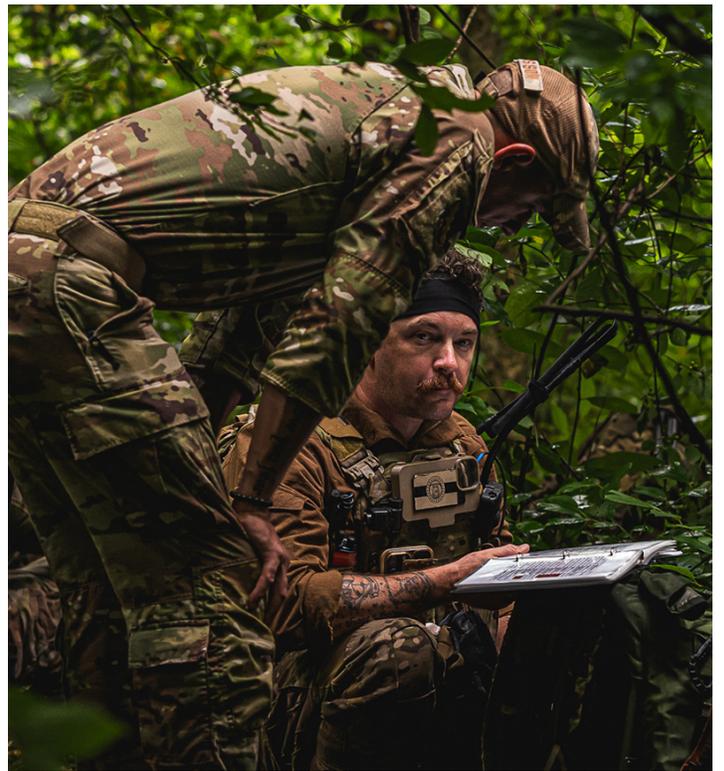


Members of the Illinois Air National Guard's 126th Air Refueling Wing return to Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, from training exercise Steel Cardinal, Nov. 1. Exercises are common operations in the Air Force to help maintain mission readiness around the world. (U.S. National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Aaron Rodriguez)

# 126th Security Forces Conduct FTX Tanglewood

126th Security Forces conducted Field Training Exercise Tanglewood at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri recently. Major training goals included providing command and control operations, maintaining situational awareness analyzing information and providing strategic planning aimed to protect personnel and critical resources. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Tech. Sgt. Ces White)





# 182nd Airlift Wing conducts 4-ship fini flight



C-130H Hercules aircraft assigned to the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, conduct a fini flight for approximately 25 members of the 182nd Operations Group in Peoria, Illinois, Nov. 1, 2025. The wing is slated to divest in its last H-model C130s in February 2026 as the unit begins conversion to the J-model Super Hercules airframe. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)



# Elmore Promoted to Master Sergeant

Surrounded by family, friends, and fellow Soldiers, Sgt. 1st Class Robert Elmore was promoted to Master Sergeant in the Illinois Army National Guard in a ceremony at Camp Lincoln Aug. 6.

Elmore, who has served in the Illinois Army National Guard for 24 years, is the noncommissioned officer in charge of the Inspector General's office.

"Sergeant Elmore was selected in the spring to fill the NCOIC position," said Col. Rhett Taylor, the Illinois National Guard Inspector General. "He possesses the values, character, and work ethic we look for in our inspectors general."

Elmore has deployed

multiple times in his career including tours to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It took a lot of people to get me here," Elmore said. "I've had a great group of mentors throughout my career."

He also thanked his family, including wife Suzanne, and his five children, for their support.

"They have watched me go from a guy who didn't want to do this anymore to this point," he said. "My family conducted a mock board where they sat me down and conducted an interview and asked questions. Without them I would not have done as well and probably would not be here today."



**Newly promoted Master Sgt. Robert Elmore thanks friends and family for their support.**



**Members of the 182nd Airlift Wing Judge Advocate section pin the rank of captain on 1st Lt. Christian Mitchell, a judge advocate with the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, during a promotion ceremony in Peoria, Nov. 1. Mitchell joined the Illinois Air National Guard in June 2023. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Lealan Buehrer)**

# Step by Step

## Building Bonds on the Road to Częstochowa

**Story and Photos by  
Staff Sgt. Paul Lauricella  
183rd Wing Public Affairs**

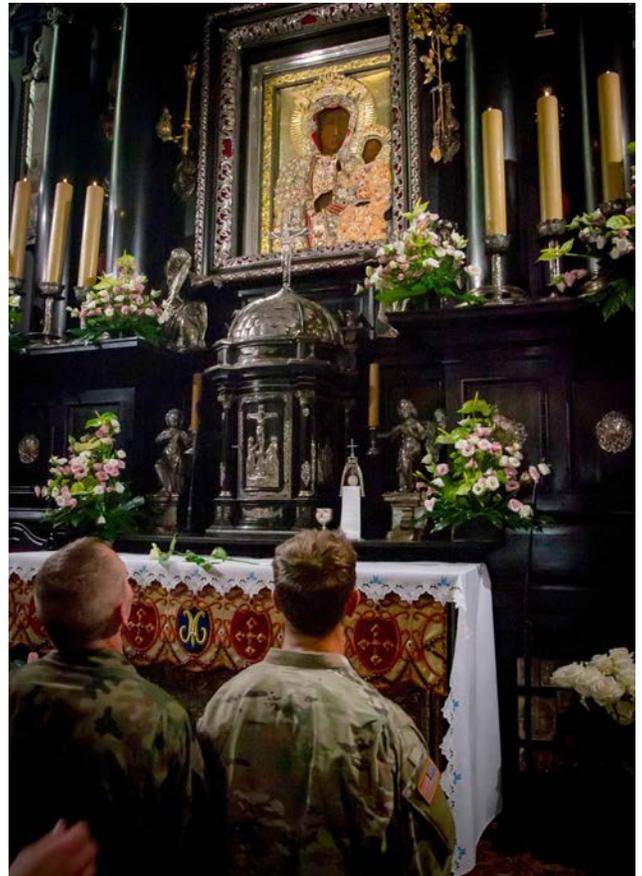
Alliances are often measured in treaties and training exercises, but sometimes they are defined by smaller things such as a shared meal, a steady hand, or a laugh on the road. From Aug. 5 to Aug. 14, 15 members of the Illinois National Guard joined counterparts from the Polish, German, Slovakian, and Lithuanian militaries on a nine-day, 190-mile pilgrimage from Warsaw to Częstochowa that showed relationships can be formed in nearly any environment.

The participation of the Illinois National Guard in the pilgrimage reflected the broader framework of cooperation with the Polish military. Since 1993, Illinois and Poland have been linked through the National Guard's State Partnership Program, which pairs state units with foreign militaries to build lasting security relationships. What began with joint training and military exchanges has expanded into cooperation that includes emergency response, cultural exchange and shared participation in NATO missions. This year's

pilgrimage connected that modern partnership to a destination that has carried deep meaning for Poland for centuries.

The shrine at Jasna Góra houses the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, known as the Black Madonna, one of Poland's most sacred symbols. For centuries, pilgrims have traveled to the monastery to see the image, which tradition holds was painted by St. Luke and brought to Poland in the 14th century. The scars on the Madonna's cheek, left by invaders, are a reminder of the nation's struggles and resilience.

The icon is not only a religious figure but also a national one. During wars and occupations, Poles have looked to Jasna Góra as a source of unity and strength. To arrive at the shrine after days of walking was to step into that history. For the Illinois



National Guard members, standing shoulder to shoulder with their Polish counterparts at such a place added weight to the partnership.

The first miles were quiet. Pilgrims exchanged names, compared packs, and kept an even pace through small towns and farm roads. The routine of walking together set a simple rhythm. Water breaks turned into short conversations. Shared snacks and quick handshakes became a way to move the day along.

Capt. Konrad Sowizral an Assistant Force Readiness Officer with the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, Chicago, said the tone felt natural from the start and only grew stronger as the road stretched on. "Walking alongside, talking with, and camping with our foreign counterparts over the duration of the pilgrimage was incredibly organic," he said. "The





esprit de corps of each side was equally high and fed off each other."

The support showed up in small ways that mattered. A Polish soldier with a fresh blister got attention from an American medic. German soldiers passed extra fruit down the line. A quiet story at lunch made the afternoon feel shorter. "Both partners had an eagerness to openly support and encourage each other over the duration of the march," Sowizral said.

As the miles plied on, the group felt more connected. Introductions gave way to easy conversation, and the group moved forward with an excited mood. "Initially the interactions started off as reserved and introverted," Sowizral said. "By the third day they flourished into cheerful and social conversations."

That shift was noticed off the route as well. Locals waved from their fences and doorsteps. Children ran ahead to keep pace for a few minutes, then doubled back to their families.

"The direct conversations I have had with our Polish soldiers and civilians were incredibly positive and they were ecstatic that this year we sent more participants," Sowizral said. "They have a strong desire to increase cooperation and deepen our ties as partners."

As a Soldier with Polish heritage, Sowizral's language skills

opened more exchanges. After an introduction, questions easily turned into longer talks about training or family or hometowns. "To them it was incredibly rare to find a U.S. service member that spoke Polish," he said. "For many Polish soldiers, it was a first to meet a U.S. officer who could speak, read, and write Polish fluently."

Curiosity moved both ways.



Soldiers compared traditions, cadence calls, and small bits of routine that make up daily service. "That openness to experience the culture, ask questions, and curiosity delighted those that interacted with the Illinois

soldiers," Sowizral said. "In turn, the Polish soldiers were very curious about our own customs."

For Capt. Isaac Carson, a Chaplain with the 178th Infantry Regiment, Chicago, IL, the pilgrimage was not just a physical test but also a chance to see how faith could create bonds across borders. He said the long days on the road gave him time to connect with chaplains and priests from other nations, conversations that he described as some of the most meaningful of the journey.

"As a Chaplain, I greatly enjoyed my conversations with the other Chaplains or Priests who pilgrimaged with us to Czestochowa," Carson said. "Though we were of different nationalities, cultures, and faith traditions, we illustrated that despite of our differences a commonality existed that brought us close together as brothers in arms and as brothers in faith."

Carson said those moments reflected a larger truth about partnership. Even when people come from different countries and traditions, he explained, there are points of connection that transcend the



differences. "I sincerely hope and pray that we discover a bond; a common unifying factor which strengthens us; bringing us together as brothers and sisters in arms," he said. "For we are far stronger together than we are apart."

He added that the march showed how shared experiences can reinforce unity in ways that formal meetings cannot. "As a team, we got the job done," Carson said. "As a team, we got to participate in something

incredible. As a team, together, each individual is better; we are stronger together, greater together."

For Paulina Konieczna, a civilian representative of the Military Ordinariate in Poland who assisted the foreign contingents along the route, the significance of the march revealed itself in small, human moments. On the first day, as the column passed through her home parish, she saw neighbors step out of their homes to wave. "Honestly, my sunglasses have

hidden more than a few tears," she said.

Konieczna says the steady cooperation she saw was easy to recognize. The pace of the line was steady, the interactions with Americans were respectful, and the work at each rest stop efficient and friendly. "From a military perspective, they are incredibly disciplined and professional, and they approach the pilgrimage with seriousness," she said. "Our relations have been exemplary. We genuinely enjoy being around each other."

She placed the experience in a wider frame as well. The values that drew people to the route were the same ones that shaped how the groups worked together. "I have a strong sense that the special thread that binds [the U.S. and Poland] is a deep love of freedom," she said. "Freedom is like oxygen to us. It's in our DNA."

Looking ahead, Konieczna says she feels confident in the direction of the partnership. "I feel completely at ease about the future of our partnership," she said. "But one thing is certain to me: we will stand on the same side, as proven friends, with the gift of a partnership that we have internalized, because it is rooted in history, in the shared experiences of doing good for each other, and in mutual understanding, born from that deep love of freedom that we carry in our



genes.”

The final miles into Częstochowa carried a sense of accomplishment. After nine days traversing central Poland, the pilgrims arrived together, their connections deepened by the friendships and trust built along the way.

For many, the moment was emotional. The challenge of the journey had given way to a shared achievement that belonged to everyone who walked it. Bonds had formed through conversations, encouragement, and the simple act of moving forward side by side.

The accomplishment was not only in the distance covered but in what it represented. Partnership grows strongest in lived experience, and the road to Częstochowa showed just that. The partnership between the United States and Poland was not only reaffirmed at the finish line, it was strengthened mile after mile, step after step.



# Senior Leaders Meet to Discuss How to Reach, Engage, Motivate Soldiers, Airmen

Illinois National Guard leaders met in Urbana Sept. 12 to workshop how to reach, engage, and motivate Soldiers and Airmen across generations as part of its quarterly Senior Leader Engagement retreat.

Author Corie Weathers led the workshop on leading the next generation using research she conducted for her book "Military Culture Shift."

The senior leaders invited a few Gen Z Soldiers to participate in the discussion and recognized them for their candor throughout the workshop.

During a break in the sessions, Illinois Army National Guard leaders presented a personalized, framed photograph to the 182nd Airlift Wing to thank and recognize the Wing for its support to the 178th Infantry Battalion's welcome home ceremony earlier this year.





## Shireman completes final flight with 126th Air Refueling Wing

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Ryan Shireman, 108th Air Refueling Squadron KC-135 Stratotanker pilot, completes his final flight at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Sept. 5. Shireman retired with more than 28 years of military service. (Illinois Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Ariana Freeman, 126th Air Refueling Wing Public Affairs Office)



# Deputy USPFO Officer for Illinois Army National Guard Promoted to Colonel

The Deputy U.S. Property and Fiscal Officer – Army was promoted to colonel in a ceremony at the Illinois State Military Museum, Springfield, July 18.

Newly-promoted Col. Jeffrey Hicks enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard, spending four years as an enlisted Soldier with Company C, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, before graduating from the accelerated Officer Candidate School in 2006, commissioning as an infantry officer.

“It is an honor and privilege to promote Lieutenant Colonel Hicks to colonel today,” said Brig. Gen. (ret.) Mark Alessia. “Our paths intersected about 15 years ago and I watched him grow up from a lieutenant to colonel.”

Alessia called getting promoted to colonel a ‘big stepping stone for officers.’

“Less than one half of one percent of Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers wear the rank of colonel,” he said. “You are at a level now where your decisions impact the entire organization and at the national level. I know no one better qualified for that role than Jeff Hicks.”

Alessia said Hicks has done some amazing things in his career.

“He has deployed twice, once to Iraq, and once to Afghanistan where the job he performed was always filled by a major or a senior captain. He filled it as a lieutenant,” Alessia said. “Today’s promotion is unique in that he’s not only getting promoted on what he has accomplished, but what he is going to help the Illinois National Guard accomplish. I look forward to seeing your accomplishments.”

Hicks said the promotion



**Newly-promoted Col. Jeffrey Hicks’ family, including father, Steve, brother, Ben, son, Eli, and wife, Katarzyna, pin on his new rank during a promotion ceremony July 18 at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield.**

ceremony was more for the people he’s served with throughout his career.

“I never dreamed of making colonel,” Hicks said. “This is probably my last promotion that I will see. I appreciate everyone who’s been along for the ride.”

The newly-promoted colonel thanked his family for their support throughout his career.

“From day one, my family has always been supportive of my endeavors,” he said. “I’ve brushed off a lot of military accomplishments over the year, however my family is prouder than words can express.”

Hicks said he and his father, Steve, had a lot of discussions

over the years about his military service.

“He was always excited for my next assignment,” he said. “When I thought there was a chance of making colonel, my dad’s tone changed. This is probably the most serious he had been since I enlisted. He often said if you think you can make colonel, you need to stick around and do it. And I thought if my dad is telling me this he has confidence in my abilities and leadership and I needed to stay.”

He also thanked his wife, Katarzyna, and son, Eli, for their support.

“What a ride it’s been. I really have no words to describe

what we've been through and accomplished," he said. "I've been scolded more than a few hundred times over the last few years, mostly due to working constantly and holding multiple jobs."

"She and I share the same passion in life. She never waived when I needed to go or a Soldier needed something," Hicks said. "She knows what Soldier care is. I've gained more resiliency and intestinal fortitude because of both of you."

Hicks' brother, Ben, has not attended one promotion or military event throughout Hicks' career.

"With this promotion, I had one requirement and that was my brother be in attendance," he said. "You don't know how much your being here means."

Hicks said he learned a lot from his grandparents.

"I don't think I'd be pinning colonel on today without the life lessons, values, tenacity, work ethic, and patience they have all taught me," he said.

Hicks shared a couple of quotes he learned early in his career.

"When things start sucking, don't quit. Tell yourself you'll quit tomorrow," he said. "And lastly, can't is not a word. If you're not doing anything to improve a process or support a Soldier, walk out the door and don't come return."

## *Col. Jeffrey Hicks' Principles to Live By*

1. Never forget your roots.
2. To face the challenges you must dig deeper, work harder, and do more. Our Soldiers depend on it.
3. Correct issues and train hard. Don't wait for someone to tell you that you're jacked up.
4. Lessons learned – every Soldier who has perished in combat, whether under your watch or someone else and every Soldier who has faced adversity and every challenge we experienced based on the mission in our decisions create important lessons that we cannot forget. We must learn from them. We must strive to be a better version of ourselves and a better unit.
5. Serve with tenacity. Don't give up. Do not let the challenges you face prevent you from accomplishing your mission.



### ***Launching Grenades Downrange***

Soldiers with the 333rd Military Police Company fire the M320 Grenade Launchers at Camp Atterbury, Indiana on Aug. 13. The M320 Grenade Launcher is a 40mm, single-shot weapon used by the U.S. Army as a replacement for the M203. It can be attached to a rifle or carbine or used as a standalone weapon system. The M320 offers improved features over the M203, including a side-opening breech for longer projectiles and a day/night sight. The 333rd Soldiers were able to shoot many rounds and complete their qualification on the M320.



### ***HSC Soldiers Step Up in Rank***

**Congratulations to Pfc. Anna Ingolia, Spc. Clark Obert and Sgt. Jessica Clark on their promotions to specialist, sergeant and staff sergeant, respectively, at Normal Readiness Center, Normal, Illinois, Aug. 17. The Soldiers, all members of the Headquarters and Support Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, were promoted by their recently appointed company commander, Capt. Matthew Selvaggio.**

## **Pleshe Retires after 22 Years**

Sgt. 1st Class Nicolas Pleshe was honored for his military service during a retirement ceremony Aug. 3 at the Northwest Armory in Chicago.

Pleshe was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for his 22 years culminating as a senior noncommissioned officer in ammunition and warehouse logistics for the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.





U.S. Army Soldiers from the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, Illinois National Guard, pass the Polish 10th Armor Cavalry Brigade (10 BKPanc) marching band during a pass in review ceremony in Świętoszów, Poland, Aug. 8, 2025. The ceremony was part of a weeklong celebration honoring the brigade's 30th anniversary and showcasing the U.S.-Polish military cooperation. (U.S. Army Photo by Paul Harris)

# Pass in Review

## Polish Military Celebrates the 10th Armored Cavalry Brigade

At right, retired Maj. Gen. Janusz Ornatowski, left, former commander of the Silesian Military District, greets U.S. Army Lt. Col. Daniel Johnson, right, commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, Illinois National Guard, before a pass and review ceremony for the 10th Armor Cavalry Brigade (10 BKPanc) in Świętoszów, Poland, Aug. 8. The event marked the brigade's 30th anniversary and featured participation from both U.S. and Polish military personnel. (U.S. Army Photo by Paul Harris)



# Sullivan-based Logistics Unit Returns after Deployment to Africa, Europe

The Illinois Army National Guard's 634th Brigade Support Battalion Forward Logistics Element returned home on Saturday, Aug. 2, after supporting U.S. Special Operations Command Africa for approximately six months.

The unit of a little more than a dozen Soldiers was divided into two teams during the deployment with the majority, led by Maj. Donald Tucker of Mattoon, based in Africa and the rest, led by 1st Sgt. Colton Love, stationed in Germany. Both teams traveled frequently providing logistics wherever needed to support U.S. military operations on the African continent.

The unit returned to St. Louis Lambert International Airport on multiple flights from their mobilization station

in Texas. There they were greeted by 634th Brigade Support Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Nick Krzesinski, Command Sgt. Maj. Sam Nall, multiple other battalion Soldiers, and some family members. Multiple Soldiers decided to surprise their families at home.

A forward logistics element (FLE) is a diverse team composed of an assortment of military occupation specialties to support the forward-deployed warfighter. The Sullivan-based played a vital role supporting U.S. forces overseas. It was activated on Jan. 20, at the Illinois Army National Guard's Readiness Center in Sullivan for deployment to Africa and Europe.



**Staff Sgt. Summer Sparacino hugs her 2-year-old daughter, Francesca, as Sparacino returns from deployment. The Illinois Army National Guard's 634th Brigade Support Battalion Forward Logistics Element returned home on Saturday, Aug. 2, after supporting U.S. Special Operations Command Africa for approximately six months.**



**Lt. Col. Nick Krzesinski, Commander of the 634th Brigade Support Battalion, shakes hands with Staff Sgt. Jackson Bland of Springfield, Ill., after Bland returned from deployment with the 634th Brigade Support Battalion Forward Logistics Element on Aug. 2.**

# Med-Det Commander Pins on Colonel

Of the approximately 10,000 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers, 22 of them wear the rank of colonel. On Aug. 2 at the Illinois State Military Museum, Springfield, Melinda Weller became the 23rd.

Weller, the commander of the Joint Force Medical Detachment, was promoted to colonel in a ceremony attended by family, friends, and fellow Soldiers.

Weller has served in various medical officer positions since commissioning in March 1997. From March 2020 to August 2020, she was ordered to State Active Duty as a medical planner playing a key role in the state's COVID-19 response. She was activated again from January 2021 to August 2021 as a COVID-19 vaccination medical planner. As a civilian, Weller is a registered nurse for the State of Illinois.

"If we would have let Mindy have her way, she would have found someone to pin on colonel and she would have went about her way of taking care of Soldiers," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "We have these ceremonies for a reason. We honor her promotion to colonel, but we also highlight those who have helped them get to this point in their careers."

Williams thanked Weller's family for their support throughout her career.

"Our families sacrifice too when we make a career out of military service," he said. "Those who have a sense of humility don't want to do these ceremonies because they don't want it to be about them. We do these to demonstrate what it takes to get here.



**Steve Sanders, father of newly promoted Col. Melinda Weller, Commander, Joint Force Headquarters Medical Detachment, pins on her new rank during a promotion ceremony at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield, Aug. 2.**

Family, friends, and those she served with along the way get to pay homage to her and honor her and what it takes to get here."

Williams said it's hard to get promoted to colonel.

"This is a testament to what she has done throughout her career," he said. "She stepped up as a battalion commander, one of the most challenging positions a Soldier can serve. But she stepped up and knocked it out of the park. That's a testament to who you are as a leader."

Williams said he is looking forward to Weller implementing her ideas of improving the experience Soldiers have serving in the Illinois National Guard.

"I'm honored to be part of this today," he said. "And I'm looking forward to many great things from you.

Weller thanked family, friends, and fellow Soldiers for attending the

ceremony.

"I am deeply honored, grateful, and humble to stand before you as a newly promoted colonel," she said. "I am grateful for the confidence placed in me and am excited to be back at the medical detachment."

Weller said it seems fitting she's back at the medical detachment at this point in her career.

"It seems fitting that my last Army promotion would be in this unit since all of my promotions have been in this unit since 1997," she said.

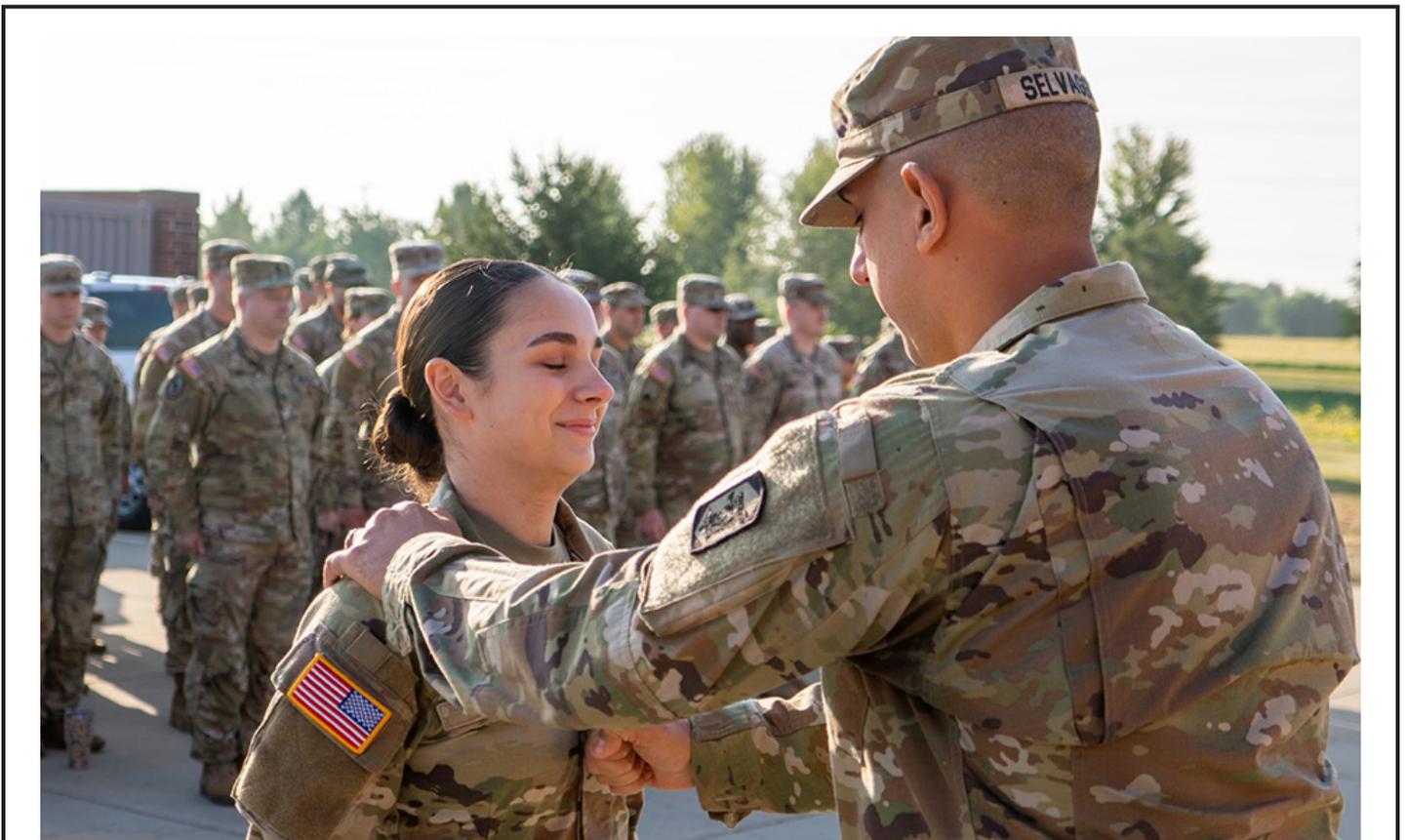
Weller said she understands her unit's mission and is looking forward to the task ahead.

"I will uphold the integrity and dedication to the medical support of all Soldiers in the Illinois Army National Guard because our business is to make sure all of the Illinois Army National Guard can medically capably do their business."



### ***404th Soldiers Receive MSMs***

Lt. Col. Jesse Wright of Homer Glen, Illinois, Deputy Commander, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, and Lt. Col. Matthew Brady of Evergreen Park, Illinois, 404th MEB operations officer, receive the Meritorious Service Medal at Heartland Community College, Normal, Illinois, Aug. 16. The medals were presented by Col. David Helfrich, the Commander of the 404th MEB, in recognition of their support during his tenure as commander.



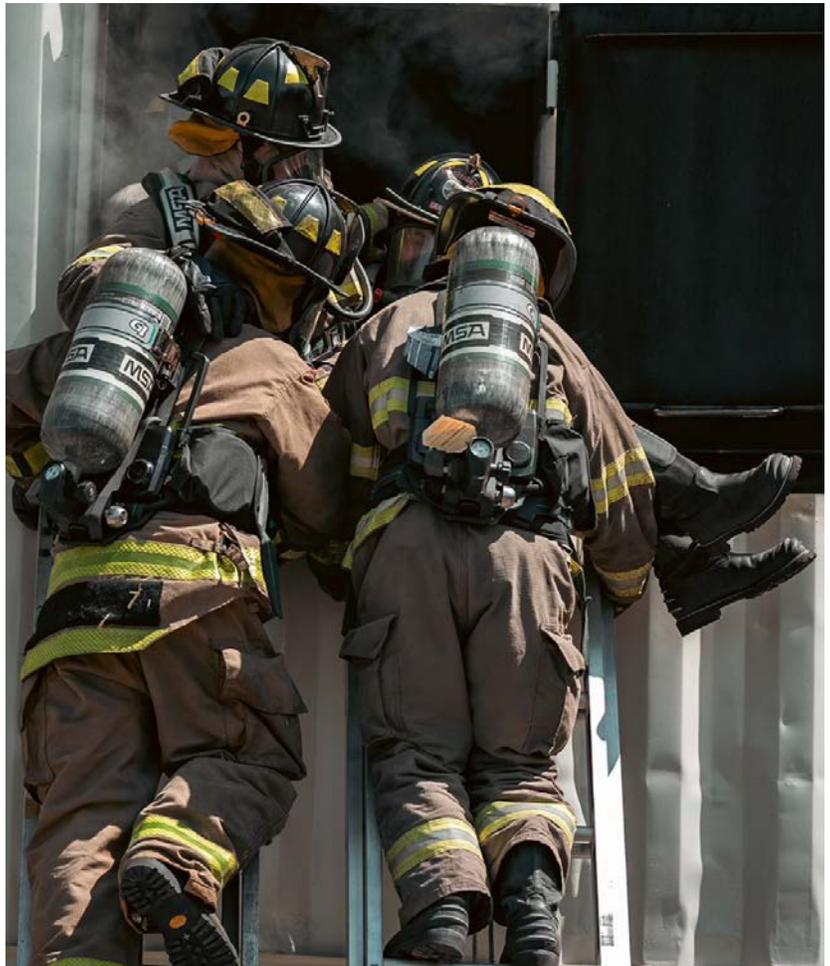
### ***Burek Promoted to Specialist***

Newly promoted Spc. Jocelyn Burek, Headquarters Support Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade received her new rank during a ceremony at the Normal Readiness Center in Normal on Sept. 4.



## ***Firefighters Conduct Training***

**Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers from the Sparta-based 615th Engineer Detachment - Firefighting Headquarters, 661st Engineer Detachment - Firefighting Team and 662nd Engineer Detachment - Firefighting Team conducted hands-on structural fire training in Harrisburg, Illinois, Sept. 6. (U.S. Army photos by Sgt. 1st Class Robert R. Adams, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade)**



# Litchfield Native Promoted to Chief Warrant Officer 4 in Illinois Army National Guard

Eleven years after becoming a warrant officer in the Illinois Army National Guard, Kelly Malcom of Litchfield was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer 4 in a ceremony Oct. 1 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

"Today is humbling because this is my final promotion in the Illinois Army National Guard," Malcom said during the ceremony. "I know I'm expected to impart wisdom on how I arrived at this point in my career. However, I stand here because of leaders who mentored me, challenged me, and the Soldiers who inspired me."

Malcom enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in October 1999, and throughout her career has demonstrated a mastery of Human Resources management, taking on roles of increasing responsibility, including 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team Human Resources technician, officer personnel manager, enlisted personnel manager, and enlisted personnel management branch chief. Malcom is the Warrant Officer Strength Manager in the Recruiting and Retention Battalion.

"I've been blessed with nearly 20 years of service working with Kelly, first as a noncommissioned officer through now as a newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army, and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "Every step along the way, I've watched her navigate positions by putting our Soldiers first. We talk about that a lot, but she actually lives it."

Williams said since he first met Malcom when she served on the 33rd's staff as a Staff Sergeant, she provides the same level of robust candor as she provides now.

"When I think about what three things best describes Kelly, it's candor, work ethic, and Soldier care," he said. "For me as then Captain Williams, through her candor I learned how to

do personnel things. She was a trusted agent for Soldier care. Those words mean things. By no means was I a personnelist, but I've always believed in Soldier care. She's a living testament to that."

Williams said it's her work ethic that makes a difference.

"Kelly has never shied away from the tough assignments," he said. "She's never shied away from moving from assignment to assignment, and she has never shied away from deployments."

Williams said none of the key positions on Malcom's biography were easy.

"She has tackled each position, and then been told she's done a great job but it's time to move on. She then salutes the flag and moves out to the next assignment because she's a trusted agent for Soldier care," he said. "Everyone who has had the luxury of serving with her knows that. You know what you're going to get with Kelly."

Williams said he would describe Malcom as a subject matter expert who always seeks to improve her craft.

"She's not worrying about if she's going to do a good job," he said. "She will take the job and figure it out because in this job she can take care of Soldiers. Our job is plain and simple to improve the experience our Soldiers have when they wear this uniform. You've been about that your entire career."

"Each and every person here is that family support that has brought me here today," Malcom said. "This rank is less about me and more about that journey and the people who have worked alongside me and in front of me pulling me up. I still continue to learn from each Soldier no matter the



**Master Sgt. (ret.) Bob Adams places rank on newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4 Kelly Malcom during a promotion ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield Oct. 1.**

rank or where they come from."

Malcom said when her journey in the Illinois Army National Guard is finished, she hopes others find success because of something she's left behind.

"My hope is that when I step away, and Soldiers step into other roles, they walk faster, climb higher, and stumble less because of something I left behind," she said. "General Colin Powell said leadership is about solving problems. When the Soldiers stop bringing you their problems, that's the day you stop leading. I must be doing something right because my inbox is always full, my phone is always ringing, and people are still asking me questions. I'm proud of the path that has brought me here today, and I'm even more excited about the work ahead."

# 404th Soldiers Conduct Range Operations

Soldiers with the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade conducted range operations at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, Illinois, Sept. 4-5.

Soldiers started by zeroing their weapons during the evening of Sept. 4 and then took to the qualification range Sept. 5 to test their M4 rifle marksmanship skills.



# Leaders Serve Thanksgiving Dinner to Activated Illinois National Guard Members

More than 1,150 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen were treated to a Thanksgiving dinner while deployed over the holidays.

Illinois Army National Guard leaders served a Thanksgiving meal to the Soldiers serving on Task Force Dragon Shield this holiday season.

While these service members will be missing home, they'll eat well.

The Defense Logistics Agency has arranged the delivery of 152,626 pounds of turkey; 124,022 pounds of beef; 66,054 pounds of ham; 38,081 pounds of shrimp; 6,512 cans of sweet potatoes; 15,282 cases of pies,

cakes; 792 cases of eggnog; and other holiday treats to military dining facilities throughout the world. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Robert Adams, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, Illinois Army National Guard.)







### ***Awards for Job Well Done***

Spc. Kayla Carnes of Forest City, Illinois and Spc. Goldeen Kobylarczyk of Williamsville, Illinois, both 68W Combat Medical Specialists assigned to the 709th Medical Company Area Support in Bartonville, Illinois, were awarded the Army Achievement Medal during a ceremony Aug. 10 for their support to the Illinois National Guard's Medical Logistics Area June 16-27. The pair inventoried the Illinois National Guard's medical and pharmaceutical stock, accounting for nearly 500 line items, nearly 180,000 individual items, and nearly 100 separate pharmaceuticals and vaccines. They also identified and removed nearly 400 expired medical and pharmaceutical items and organized the area to create efficiencies and improve safety.



### ***Carter Becomes Commander of 906th Air Refueling Squadron***

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Eric M. Wolf, outgoing 906th Air Refueling Squadron commander, right, passes a guidon to Col. Nicolas Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing commander, during the 906th ARS change of command ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 1, 2025. During his tenure, Wolf led 155 Airmen that support, maintain and employ the KC-135R aircraft in combat environments to provide aerial refueling capabilities across the world. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Patrick Wyatt)

U.S. Air Force Col. Nicolas Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing commander, left, passes a guidon to Lt. Col. Brandon Carter, incoming 906th Air Refueling Squadron commander, during the 906th ARS change of command ceremony at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Aug. 1, 2025. Carter now commands 155 Airmen that support, maintain and employ the KC-135R aircraft in combat environments to provide aerial refueling capabilities across the world. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Patrick Wyatt)

# AFLCMC PM Visits 183rd Centralized Repair Facility

Col. Jessica Kashka, Air Force Life Cycle Management Center program manager F-15EX within the Fighters & Advanced Aircraft directorate, traveled to Springfield, to visit the Illinois Air National Guard's 183rd Wing Centralized Repair Facility (CRF).

The CRF is a jet engine repair facility within the United States Air Force, serving as the only dedicated repair facility for the F-15EX aircraft fleet.

The team of 119 individuals maintain jet engines powering the U-2, F-16 and F-15EX. The 183rd also supports the total Air Force with base transitions during fleet divestitures and facilitates the establishment of new maintenance squadrons.



**Col. Jessica Kashka, Air Force Life Cycle Management Center program manager for the F-15EX, views an aircraft engine with Capt. Jon Kent, Director of Operations for the 183rd Maintenance Wing, Springfield.**



**Illinois Army National Guard Spc. Brian Barney, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, graduated from the U.S. Army's Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia in July. He returned to the ILARNG as an expert on Small Unit tactics and troop leading procedures.**



## **Atwell Coined for Aviation Achievement**

**Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, congratulates Illinois Army National Guard Warrant Officer 1 Alex Atwell of Madison, Wisconsin. Atwell, a pilot with Peoria-based Company B, 238th Aviation Regiment, was named the Army Aviation Flight School Distinguished Honor Graduate on Oct. 30 at Fort Rucker, Alabama. Williams presented Atwell a coin Dec. 2 at the Illinois National Guard Headquarters on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.**

# Aviators Perform Flyover at Chicago Bears Game



Illinois Army National Guard Sgt. Bridget Huizenga, kneeling on the UH-47 Chinook's ramp, peers at the other helicopters during the Chicago Bears flyover flight. A diamond formation of Illinois Army National Guard helicopters performed a flyover over Soldier Field in Chicago on Dec. 14 just before the Chicago Bears' 31-3 victory over the Cleveland Browns. The formation included a UH-47 Chinook, two UH-60 Blackhawks, and a UH-72 Lakota from Peoria, Kankakee and Decatur. These aerial demonstrations of patriotism and power also have military training value. These "time on target" missions include careful planning, close coordination, great precision, as well as effective communication between aircraft and with the ground. They help our Soldiers prepare for their military missions.



An Illinois Army National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter, piloted by Warrant Officer 2 AJ Hager and Warrant Officer 2 Anthony McCormick, lands at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Kankakee, Ill., Dec. 14 in preparation for the Chicago Bears flyover later that day.



An Illinois Army National Guard UH-72 Lakota and UH-60 Blackhawk kick up snow while landing at the Guard's Army Aviation Support Facility Kankakee, Ill., Dec. 14 in preparation for the Chicago Bears flyover later that day. The helicopters approach the landing area slowly acting like giant snowblowers before landing.



### ***Nighttime .50-cal Qualification***

Spc. Anthony Urgero fires a M2 Browning .50 caliber machine gun as Pfc. Matthew Teruel looks on during the 333rd Military Police Company's M2 .50cal night qualification. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Wagner)



### ***Sand Table Diagram Exercise***

Soldiers from the 33rd Military Police Battalion conduct a sand table diagram in preparation for a military police training exercise at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, Aug. 13.



### ***Professional Development for MP Battalion officers***

Officers from the 33rd Military Police Battalion conduct professional development training among distinguished visitors Col. David Helfrich, the commander of the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, and Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, the State Command Chief Warrant Officer for the Illinois National Guard, at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, Aug. 12.



# Illinois Army National Guard Conducts Combatives Training, Tournament

The Illinois Army National Guard held Modern Army Combatives Training in August, culminating with the Combatives Tournament.

Army Combatives is a system of hand-to-hand combat training primarily used by the U.S. Army, which has evolved over the years to meet the demands of modern

warfare.

The Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) was established in 1995 and aims to instill the Warrior Ethos in soldiers, preparing them to engage effectively in hand-to-hand combat situations. (U.S. Army photos by Maj. Patrick Clark, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment.)





# Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers Support Bright Star 25 Exercise in Egypt



Illinois Army National Guard Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca, the Illinois National Guard Director of the Joint Staff, discusses Bright Star 25 with Egyptian Army Maj. Gen. Sherif Al-Araishi, the Director of the Military Training Authority on Sept. 3 prior to the Command Post Exercise (CPX) during Bright Star 25 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt. Fonseca is filling the role of the U.S. Higher Command Commander during the CPX working side-by-side with his Egyptian Army counterpart, Brig. Gen. Ismail Ahmed. The exercise brings together forces from across the globe, underscoring the United States' enduring commitment to working alongside Egypt and partner nations to strengthen collective security and promote regional stability. (U.S. Army photos by Lt. Col. Brad Leighton, Illinois National Guard)



Illinois Army National Guard Maj. David Wachtveitl discusses the upcoming Command Post Exercise (CPX) with an Egyptian Army officer on Sept. 3 during Bright Star 25 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt. The two officers will work in the Joint Operations Cell during the CPX. Wachtveitl is also the Illinois National Guard's Bright Star 25 project officer.



An Egyptian Army officer discusses the upcoming Command Post Exercise (CPX) with Illinois Army National Guard Capt. Jurl Vinegar on Sept. 3 during Bright Star 25 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt. The two officers work together in the higher headquarters Fires Cell during the multinational exercise.

# HSC Soldiers Recognized for Training Excellence

Pfc. Osbaldo Reyes, Spc. Alondra Bustos, Spc. Danielle Cobb, Spc. Steven Maglio, Sgt. Micaela Cooper, Sgt. David Leon, Sgt. Jacob Nance, Sgt. Kiana Ortiz, Sgt. Hunter Turpin, Sgt. Conner Young, and Staff Sgt. Zachary Meinhart, all from the Headquarters and Support Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, receive the Army Achievement Medal at Normal Readiness Center in Normal, Aug. 17, for outstanding performance during the unit's annual training at Camp Dodge, Iowa.



**Spc. Alondra Bustos**



**Spc. Danielle Cobb**



**Sgt. Micaela Cooper**



**Sgt. David Leon**



**Spc. Steven Maglio**



**Staff Sgt. Zachary Meinhart**



**Sgt. Jacob Nance**



**Pfc. Osbaldo Reyes**



**Sgt. Kiana Ortiz**



**Sgt. Conner Young**



**Sgt. Hunter Turpin**

# 182nd Airlift Wing Undergoes Combat Readiness Inspection at Volk Field



182nd Airlift Wing leadership operates under evaluation during a Combat Readiness Inspection.



Airmen with the 182nd Operations Support Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, evaluate chemical detection tape on a Post-Attack Reconnaissance (PAR) route during a Combat Readiness Inspection.



Airmen with the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, protect assets from chemical agent exposure during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) at Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 5, 2025.



An Airmen with the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, reacts to a simulated building fire during a Combat Readiness Inspection (CRI) at Volk Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, Sept. 5, 2025. A CRI is an evaluation of a unit's ability to rapidly deploy, sustain, and execute missions under realistic, high-stress scenarios.

*U.S. Air National Guard  
photos by  
Master Sgt. Jennifer Brown,  
182nd Airlift Wing*

# TAG Visits Polish Partners to Discuss SPP

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and the Commander of the Illinois National Guard, and other senior Illinois National Guard leaders, met with senior Polish military leaders in September.

The leaders discussed the 32-year State Partnership Program between the Illinois National Guard and the Polish military and ways to further enhance what continues to be the Gold Standard partnership.



# Remembering Our Fallen



**Spc. Brandon Ramsey**

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



**Spc. Charles Lamb**

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



**Staff Sgt. Jason Vazquez**

2008: Staff Sgt. Jason A. Vazquez, 24, of Chicago, died Sept. 17 in Gerdia Seria, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when their vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery, based in Sycamore.



**Spc. James Grijalva**

2005: Spc. James T. Grijalva, 26, of Burbank, died in Baghdad, Iraq, on Oct. 12, of a non-combat related injury. Grijalva was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, Urbana.



**Sgt. Shawna Morrison**

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



**Sgt. Joshua Harris**

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



**Sgt. Jessica Cawvey**

2004: Sgt. Jessica L. Cawvey, 21, of Mahomet, died Oct. 6 in Fallujah, Iraq, of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near her convoy vehicle. Cawvey was assigned to the 1544th Transportation Company, Paris.



**Sgt. Kevin Grieco**

2008: Staff Sgt. Kevin D. Grieco, 35, of Bartlett, died Oct. 27 in Baghlan, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when a suicide bomber detonated explosives as he was preparing to enter a building. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery, Sycamore.

# Remembering Our Fallen



**1st Lt. Brian Slavenas**

2003: 1st Lt. Brian Slavenas, 30, Genoa, was killed Nov. 2 of wounds sustained when his aircraft was shot down near the town of Fallujah, Iraq. 1st Lt. Slavenas was assigned to Company F, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation in Peoria.



**Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Wehrly**

2005: Sgt. 1st Class Kyle B. Wehrly, 28, of Galesburg, died in Ashraf, Iraq, on Nov. 28, of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near his HMMWV during patrol operations. Sgt. 1st Class Wehrly was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery, Macomb.



**Spc. Ashley Sietsema**

2007: Spc. Ashley Sietsema, 20, of River Grove, died in Kuwait Nov. 12 as a result of injuries suffered in a non-combat single vehicle accident while transporting Soldiers. She was assigned to the 708th Medical Company (Ground Ambulance), North Riverside.



**Spc. Ashley Sietsema**

2005: Spc. Brian A. Wright, 19, of Keensburg, died in Ramadi, Iraq of wounds sustained when his HMMWV struck a mine during combat operations. Spc. Wright was assigned to the 135th Engineer Company, Lawrenceville.

## Undercover Colonel

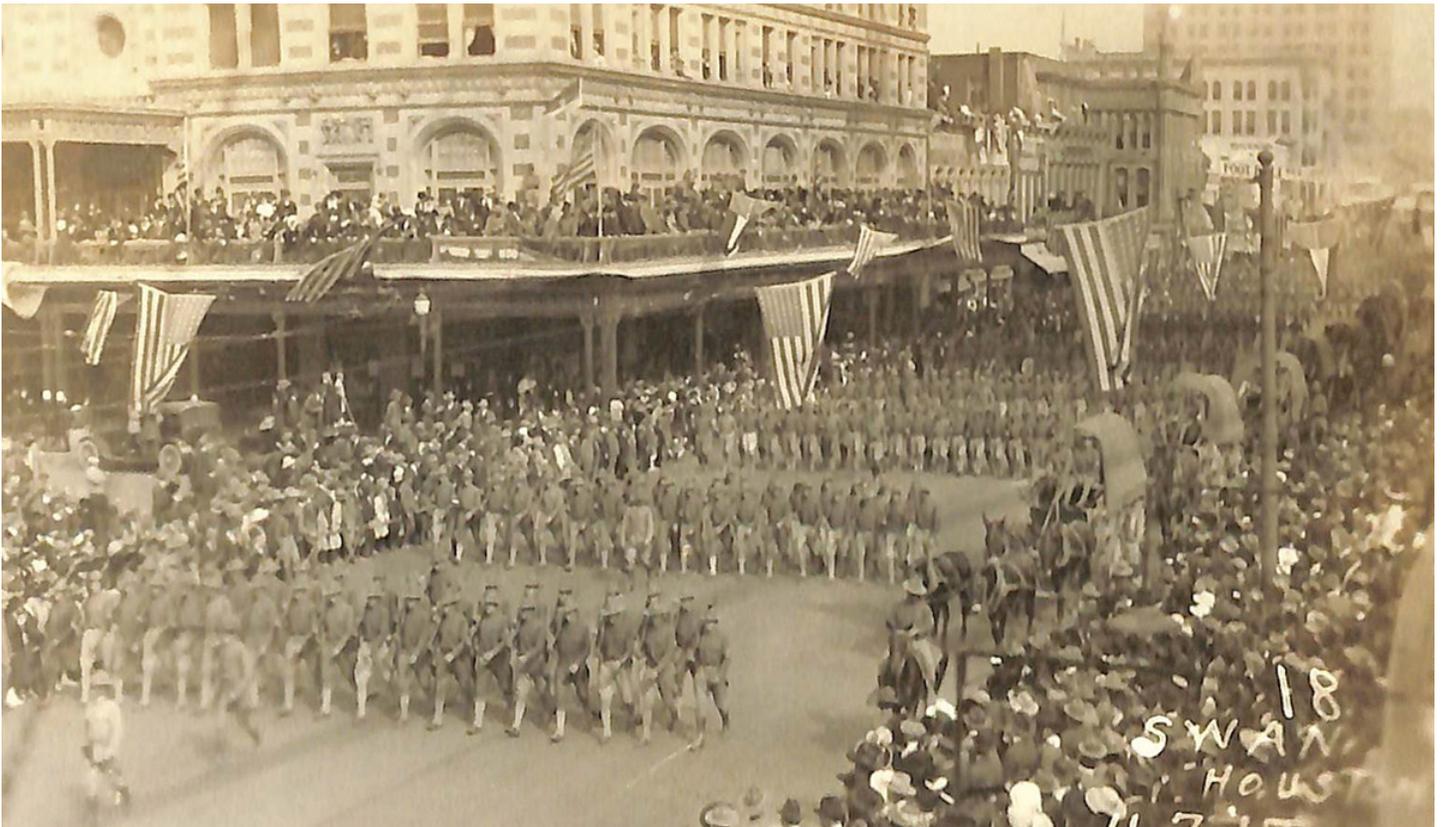


Col. Nick Henschel, Commander of the Illinois Air National Guard's 126th Air Refueling Wing, uses a magnifying glass to inspect the gasket on the cover of an Embedded Global Positioning/Inertial Navigation System on a KC-135 Stratotanker at Scott Air Force Base, Sept 25. Henschel spent part of the morning with the 126th Maintenance Squadron, Avionics shop. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)



Col. Nick Henschel, Commander of the 126th Air Refueling Wing, went undercover in the 126th Medical Group with the dental section on Aug. 2. He sat with Dr. Stoeckel (Dentist) and Staff Sgt. Stephen Castillo (Dental assistant) to see a few patients over drill weekend. Stoeckel observed as Henschel performed an oral examination and oral cancer screening, and then took a few X-rays. Castillo demonstrated the process for taking patient vitals and updating patient records. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Vincent Lang)





### ***Houston Parade Honors 33rd Division Soldiers***

**Nov. 7, 1917:** a military parade in Houston, Texas organized by the soldiers of the 33rd Division for the citizens of Houston. The newly minted 33rd Division had been training at Camp Logan in Texas since September 15, 1917 in preparation for World War One, the Great War.

The inscription for this photo reads "Assigned to 58th Field Artillery Brigade, 33rd Prairie. Reviewing stand on balcony of Rice Hotel Nov 7th, 1917."



### ***182nd Tactical Air Support Group activated for Operation Desert Shield***

**Dec. 7, 1990:** President George Bush Sr. called on Illinois Governor James R. Thompson to activate thirty-one members of the 182nd Tactical Air Support Group for service in the Persian Gulf. The Peoria based unit of the Air National Guard became the first Illinois Air Guard unit activated for Operation Desert Shield and deployed to the Middle East for 180 days. They acted as a liaison between the Army and Air Force coordinating air to ground tactical operations.

These OA-37s are some of the aircraft the 182nd flew shortly before they switched to the F-16s.

**THE PRAIRIE SENTINEL  
1301 NORTH MACARTHUR BOULEVARD  
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS 62702**

**DSN: 555-3569  
PHONE: (217) 761-3569  
FAX: (217) 761-2988**

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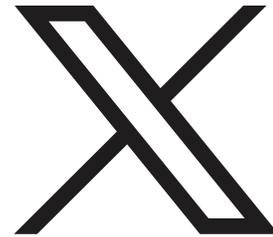
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