

ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD

PRAIRIE SENTINEL

VOLUME 23



*Illinois National Guard SFAB Team trains
Djiboutian Rapid Intervention Forces*

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JANUARY-MARCH 2026

ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD PRAIRIE SENTINEL

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The Illinois National Guard paid tribute to its most notable militiaman and 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, during a ceremony at his tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield.

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The 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade bids farewell to Col. David Helfrich and welcomes Col. Jessica McPherson as its new commander.

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RRB's 'Honeybadgers' takes top Recruiting Company honors for third straight year.

He's The Top p. 43

First Sergeant Matthew Serowka, the senior enlisted leader of the Woodstock-based H Company "Honeybadgers," was named the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion's First Sergeant of the Year.

Two-Time Top Recruiter p. 44

Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco, a recruiter based in Schaumburg, has been named the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) of the Year for the second consecutive year.

Ramos Earns Rookie Honors p. 45

Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos, a recruiter with the Woodstock-based H Company "Honeybadgers," was named the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion "Rookie of the Year".

VSO Promoted to CWO 4 p. 46

Melissa Downey, a Veterans Service Officer, was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer 4 in January.

Turnbaugh Promoted to SGM p. 47

After more than 32 years in the Illinois Army National Guard, Jeremy Turnbaugh was promoted to sergeant major in January.

Major Promotion for Bryant p. 48

Aaron Bryant, the operations branch chief of the Illinois National Guard's Joint staff, was promoted to major in March.

New Commander for 34th DSB p. 53

The 34th Division Sustainment Brigade bid farewell to Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy and welcomed Col. Bradley Roach as its new commander.

Linguists Compete to be Best p. 56

Five Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers competed the 8th annual Best Linguist Competition in Utah.

Milan Soldier Promoted p. 58

Daniela Martinez was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant during a ceremony at the Milan-based 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment.

217th EIS Hones Readiness p. 59

The 217th Engineering Installation Squadron enhanced its deployment capabilities through vital Increment Monitor Training, at the 183rd Wing.

Soldiers Compete for Top Title p. 60

Eight Soldiers from the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade competed in the brigade's Best Warrior Competition at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles.

Dolan Selected Augmentee of Year p. 64

Air Forces Southern has selected Master Sgt. Matthew Dolan, Air Mobility Control Team Superintendent, Air Mobility Operations Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, as the Enlisted Individual Mobilization Augmentee of the year for AFSOUTH.

Air Guard Cold Weather Training p. 78

Two Illinois Air National Guard Security Forces Airmen complete in the Air National Guard Cold Weather training.

1886th Engineers Return Home p. 87

About 15 Soldiers from the 1886th Engineer Facilities Detachment were welcomed home after completing a nine-month deployment to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.



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35th anniversary of Desert Storm p. 14

Group gathers at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield, Feb. 28, to mark the 35th anniversary of the Persian Gulf War cease fire.

White Sox Hits Home Run p. 16

When a small White Sox ice cream helmet went missing from a memorial case honoring the 34 Illinois National Guard service members who have died in service to their country since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Chicago White Sox knocked it out of the park and answered the call to provide a replacement.

Small Store, Big Impact p. 20

At the tip of the spear, where Soldiers operate from small, dispersed sites far from large installations, even limited resources can make a meaningful difference.

From Soldier Care to Leadership p. 23

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Lt. Col. Lionel Gonzalez during a retirement ceremony, recognizing more than 23 years of service to the state of Illinois and the nation.

232nd Chaplain Honors Anzio p. 24

Chaplain (Capt.) Aaron Melman of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion supported the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division and the American Battle Monuments Commission during commemorations of the 82nd anniversary of the 3rd Infantry Division's landings at Anzio and Nettuno during World War II.

Student Honored with Dyett Award p. 28

Dyett High School student Aaron Benjamin was honored as the 2026 recipient of the Captain Walter H. Dyett Award for best emulating the characteristics of Captain Walter H. Dyett, including discipline, dedication, hard work and creativity.



Veterans Remember Kash p. 30

Veterans and family gathered to remember Spc. Benjamin Kash who died in 1999 as a result of an accident at his unit's annual training.

Reese Retires from Guard p. 39

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Master Sgt. Steven Reese during a retirement ceremony, recognizing his 23 years of service.

Wilkerson Retires After 32 Years p. 40

After more than three decades of service to the state and nation, Lt. Col. Justin Wilkerson, Deputy Joint Operations Officer of the Illinois National Guard, has retired.

Retiring on a High Note p. 52

A respected leader and accomplished musician, Lt. Col. Bryan Miller retired from the Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing after nearly 30 years.

Combatives Instructor Retires p. 65

Staff Sgt. Christopher P. Kelnhofer, a longtime Modern Army Combatives Program instructor, was honored during a retirement ceremony, recognizing 23 years of service.

34th DSB Commander Promoted p. 66

The Commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade credited the success in his military career to giants who offered him life lessons.

Gold Star Mission Scholarships p. 74

For Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jacob Harris, a two-time Gold Star Mission scholarship recipient and a member of the Illinois State Police, becoming involved in the organization put him on a path to success.

Honoring the Father of Cavalry p. 77

Col. Michael Kowalski, the Commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, addressed students at the Polish Museum of America, highlighting the legacy of General Casimir Pulaski and the critical role of the modern Cavalry.

FIRO Promoted to CWO 4 p. 79

Newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4 Craig Hires, the Illinois Army National Guard Force Integration Readiness Officer, was promoted during a recent ceremony.

Daily Promoted to CWO 4 p. 79

The Illinois Army National Guard promoted Chief Warrant Officer Trevor Daily to chief warrant officer four during a ceremony.

Cold Weather Capable p. 80

Public Affairs Airmen from the Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria and 183rd Wing in Springfield, trained in Arctic conditions to prepare for cold-weather operations and assess how effectively they and their equipment function in austere environments.

PHOTO SPREADS

33rd IBCT Military Ball p. 10

Leaders from the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team presents various awards during the brigade's Military Ball in Champaign.

Order of the Sphinx p. 32

Maj. Spencer Ervin was inducted into the Order of the Sphinx during the Illinois National Guard Military Intelligence Workshop. The Order of the Sphinx recognizes sustained excellence and significant long-term contributions to the Military Intelligence Corps.

182nd AW Hosts AF ROTC p. 33

The 182nd Airlift Wing hosted the University of Illinois Air Force ROTC Detachment 190, sharing the mission of the 182nd Airlift Wing and showcasing the work of the 182nd Civil Engineer and Security Forces Squadrons.

Sycamore Open House p. 34

A Battery, 2-122nd Field Artillery teamed with the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Command to hold an open house so that members of the public could come in and see and experience what members of their unit do.

Polish Partners Visit Camp Lincoln p. 36

The Illinois National Guard welcomed leaders from the Polish Territorial Defence Forces to Camp Lincoln for a professional exchange focused on strengthening partnerships, sharing best practices, and building readiness together.

Bostic Promoted**p. 49**

Senior Master Sgt. Nathaniel Bostic was officially promoted to Chief Master Sergeant, during a ceremony at the 183rd Wing.

TAG Talks Teamwork, Leadership**p. 50**

Maj Gen Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, shared his wisdom with the guests at Hubbard High School's 47th JROTC Military Ball.

Chicago Auto Show 2026**p. 54**

The Illinois National Guard partnered with the USO at the Auto Show so that the public could learn more about the Illinois National Guard and the USO.

Greasing the Engine**p. 57**

Routine maintenance supports mission readiness through the Illinois National Guard core competencies of "Man, Equip, Train, Deploy."

126th Yellow Ribbon event**p. 58**

Yellow Ribbon programs connect deployers and their families to resources while they are deployed.

Blankenship Retires**p. 67**

Chief Master Sgt. David Blankenship Jr., superintendent of the 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, retired after 40 years of distinguished military service.

Air Guard's Outstanding Airmen**p. 70**

Wing OAY winners from the 183d Wing, 182nd Airlift Wing and 126th Air Refueling Wing competed at the state level, with state winners advancing to the regional level of competition.

126th ARW Receives MEEP award**p. 72**

For the second year in a row the 126th Air Refueling Wing has won 1st place in the Mission Execution Excellence Program, for fuel efficiency, Air Reserve Component category.

126th ARW Offsite Event**p. 72**

The 126th Air Refueling Wing Commanders and Senior Enlisted Leaders came together for a two-day Strategic Offsite event to align priorities and plan for the future.

126th OSS Cross-Functional**p. 73**

The 126th Operations Support Squadron, Intelligence shop, had a cross-functional day with members of the 618th Air Operations Center/Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Division.

Leaders Visit Air Forces Southern**p. 84**

Air Forces Southern hosted Illinois Air National Guard leaders Brig. Gen. Kevin E. Jacobs, Brig. Gen. Steven B. Rice and Col. Shawn Strahle for a firsthand look at how Citizen Airmen are helping deliver airpower across the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.

182nd Conducts PHA Quick**p. 85**

Illinois Air National Guard's 182d Medical Group conduct the Periodic Health Assessment Quick at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria.

Medical Company Training**p. 86**

The 708th Medical Company Ground Ambulance training included medics driving to a casualty drill off site and maintaining communications.

FA Unit Conducts Blood Drive**p. 90**

The 2-123rd Field Artillery hosted a community blood drive with ImpactLife in conjunction with the battalion's annual Periodic Health Assessment in Milan.

Forest Park St. Paddy's Parade**p. 91**

Soldiers with the 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion added Army green to Forest Park's 30th annual St. Patrick's Day parade.

**Spring fun with Military Families**

Is there such a thing as too many Easter eggs? This little tyke thinks not as Soldiers and their families gathered at the Mt. Vernon Armory for their annual Spring Event hosted by Survivor Outreach Services of Illinois March 28. The event brought together military families for an afternoon of games, activities, and community connection, highlighting the importance of supporting military families. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Justin Malone, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

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 to our dedicated families who stand beside us,

I am filled with immense pride as I reflect on the incredible work you do every day, both at home and abroad. Your dedication and professionalism are the bedrock of our organization and the source of our strength.

Our own Airmen from the 126th Air Refueling Wing are forward-deployed, providing critical air refueling support for Operation Epic Fury. This large-scale, joint-force operation is a decisive action to neutralize threats to the United States and our Allies. Our tankers and crews are ensuring that American and coalition aircraft can maintain pressure and systematically dismantle the adversary's military and nuclear infrastructure.

We are immensely proud of their vital role in this mission and pray for their safe return.

In addition, we have about 55

Airmen from the 183rd Wing on a deployment to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona where they have been actively involved in military operations in support of U.S. Southern Command. These Airmen have shown their utmost professionalism on historic missions.

Our global impact also extends through our robust State Partnership Program. For more than 30 years, our partnership with Poland has been the "gold standard," a model of cooperation and shared learning. We have trained, deployed, and grown alongside our Polish allies, and this enduring relationship continues to strengthen our forces. I am also thrilled to announce our new partnership with the Portuguese Armed Forces, which was formalized in January of this year.

This new chapter will enhance our interoperability and expand our global reach, with planned collaborations in cybersecurity, defense industry engagement, and disaster response. These partnerships are not just about military exercises; they are about building lasting relationships and strengthening global security.

Our commitment to our communities here in Illinois is just as vital as our missions overseas. It is through community engagement that we build trust, inspire future generations, and give back to the state that supports us. We must continue to be visible and share the incredible opportunities the Illinois National Guard offers.

One of the most impactful ways we engage with our community is through the Lincoln's ChalleNGe Academy. This incredible program provides at-risk youth with a second chance, offering them the structure, education, and life skills to become successful and productive citizens.

The Academy is always in need of dedicated mentors to guide these young men and women after they graduate from the residential phase. I encourage each of you to consider becoming a mentor and making a profound difference in the life of a young person in our state.

Everything we do, from high-stakes deployments to community service, is guided by our four lines of effort:

- **Readiness:** The crucial role of the 126th Air Refueling Wing in Operation Epic Fury and our rigorous training with partners in Poland and Portugal demonstrate our unwavering commitment to being a ready force, prepared to answer the call at a moment's notice.

- **People:** Our strength lies in our people. We are committed to supporting our Soldiers, Airmen, and their families, and to recognizing their incredible achievements. Our engagement with programs like Lincoln's ChalleNGe Academy showcases our commitment to the people of Illinois.

- **Modernization:** Through new partnerships, advanced training, and the adoption of new technologies, we are constantly modernizing to meet the challenges of the future.

- **Community Engagement:** Our active participation in our communities, from supporting our schools to mentoring our youth, is fundamental to who we are. We are not just Soldiers and Airmen; we are citizens of Illinois, dedicated to serving our neighbors.

Thank you for your continued service and sacrifice. You are the embodiment of the National Guard's motto: "Always Ready, Always There."

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



U.S. Soldiers assigned to Logistics Company Advising Team 6640 of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, and Djiboutian soldiers assigned to 2nd Company Bataillon d’Intervention Rapide, pose for a photo at Goubet Range, Djibouti, Oct. 20, 2025. During daylight hours, BIR personnel are preparing to train for nighttime range operations that will qualify them as night fire trainers for the Djibouti Armed Forces. (Photo courtesy of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa Public Affairs Office)

U.S. Security Force Assistance Brigade Trains Djiboutian Rapid Intervention Force

***By Sgt. 1st Class Shane Klestinski
U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa***

U.S. Soldiers assigned to Logistics Company Advising Team 6640 of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, trained 80 members of Djibouti’s 2nd Company, Bataillon d’Intervention Rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion) in night range operations on Goubet Range, Djibouti, Oct. 15-Nov. 25, 2025.

During their rotation, the 54th SFAB personnel who supported the mission under Civil Affairs Battalion, U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF), dedicated one training evening per week to 20 Soldiers from each BIR company. Personnel with the East Africa

Response Force from Camp Lemonnier’s security forces battalion provided additional support.

According to U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Neil Limper, executive officer for the advising team in Djibouti, this train-the-trainer effort was typical of the SFAB’s mission to conduct security force assistance operations worldwide.

“This training was conducted at the operational and tactical level to develop the capacity, capability and interoperability of [Djiboutian] partner forces, as well as their supporting institutions to accomplish theater security

cooperation objectives,” Limper said.

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class David Holzrichter, assistant team leader, explained that their mission successfully embedded a cadre of night-fire trainers across three maneuver companies and the headquarters company of the Djiboutian unit.

“Having received this training, Djiboutian BIR personnel showed they could independently train their remaining forces,” Holzrichter said. “This marks a significant milestone in their operational self-sufficiency. It shows their training coordinators now have a framework to build tactics, techniques and procedures to integrate night fire into their



A U.S. Soldier assigned to Logistics Company Advising Team 6640 of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, demonstrates how to operate and mount night vision devices to members of Headquarters Company, Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide at Goubet Range, Djibouti, Nov. 25, 2025. During daylight hours, BIR personnel are preparing to train for nighttime range operations that will qualify them as night fire trainers for the Djibouti Armed Forces. (Photo courtesy of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa Public Affairs Office)

future training.”

Limper noted that the Djibouti Armed Forces is an important strategic partner for U.S. Africa Command in the Horn of Africa in a relationship focused on counterterrorism, as well as regional security and stability. The BIR’s mission primarily concentrates on security concerns, combatting extremism and executing specialized missions.

“Having a partner force that is just as capable as our own forces makes for a more formidable partner,” Limper said.

U.S. Army Maj. Micah Bennett, BIR logistics advisor, said that the BIR’s improved capacity will alleviate the training burden for future SFAB advisor teams and create a benchmark for future teams’ evaluations. Participating in this training also served as a demonstration of Djibouti’s commitment to burden-sharing in regional security matters.

“The BIR is an internal defense force,” Bennett said. “Having a unit capable of operating in low visibility conditions allows the Djiboutian military to better defend their country.”



A U.S. Soldier, left, assigned to Logistics Company Advising Team 6640 of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade, adjusts a night vision device for a Djiboutian soldier, right, assigned to Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide at Goubet Range, Djibouti, Oct. 20, 2025. BIR personnel are receiving training to conduct nighttime range operations that will qualify them as night fire trainers for the Djibouti Armed Forces. (Photo courtesy of Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa Public Affairs Office)



Senior leaders of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, Illinois Army National Guard, and the 83rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 510th Regional Support Group, 7th Mission Support Command, stand for the beginning of the transfer of authority ceremony on March 20, 2026, in Zagan, Poland. The transfer of authority represents an event of coordinated events between an incoming unit and an outgoing unit.

ILARNG's 232nd CSSB Transfers Authority of Overseas Mission to Army Reserve's 83rd CSSB

***Story and photos by
Staff Sgt. Stanford Toran
7th Mission Support Command***

The Illinois Army National Guard's 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion marked the end of their deployment with a Transfer of Authority to the Army Reserve's 83rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 510th Regional Support Group, 7th Mission Support Command, March 20, Zagan,

Poland.

The ceremony marked the end of the rotation for the 232nd CSSB, commanded by Lt. Col. Daniel Johnson, and the beginning of the rotation for the 83rd CSSB, commanded by U.S. Army Lt. Col. Christen Gonzales.

"Today we make a transition," said Col. Daniel Meyers, commander of the 510th Regional Support Group, 7th Mission Support Command. "First to the Soldiers of the 232nd CSSB, your

performance over the past nine months have been nothing short of exceptional."

The transfer of authority represents a deliberated and coordinated efforts between the outgoing unit and incoming units, ensuring seamless transition of responsibilities. This also includes detailed coordination with equipment inventories, transfer of knowledge to maintain uninterrupted support to ongoing missions.

This ceremony is not just a change of authority, but a continuation of success with sustainment demonstrated to NATO's operation across the eastern flank.

The 232nd CSSB, known as Task Force Wojtek, has executed over 200 missions across eight countries, covering more than 750,000 kilometers with no incidents occurred, providing security for rail operations until mission complete.

The 232nd CSSB played a major role in European theater exercises such as Saber Junction, Operation Sentry, Combined Resolved, and Defender Europe.

"Because of your efforts, units across this theater remained ready," said Meyers. "Because of your discipline and commitment, we strengthen deterrence. You

didn't just support the mission, you enabled it."

The 83rd CSSB, known as Task Force Phoenix, will continue the success of their predecessors, ensuring that mission requirements will be maintained and excelled laid by a strong foundation and great leadership.

"It is truly an honor to assume command of Taskforce Phoenix and continue this mission," said Lt. Col. Christen Gonzales, commander of the 83rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 510th Regional Support Group, 7th Mission Support Command. "Lt. Col. Johnson and Taskforce Voytek, thank you for the strong foundation you left behind. We will carry that forward."

The transition also underscores the collaborative effort between

the 83rd CSSB and the 510th RSG, whose brigade-level leadership ensures synchronized operations across multiple units in theater. This partnership enables efficient cooperation and reinforces the U.S. Army's ability to operate effectively alongside allied forces, NATO partners, and host nation.

"To our partners and enablers, Polish allies, we are proud to stand alongside with you," said Gonzales. "We will continue this operation with the professionalism and commitment it demands."

Meyers commented on the RSG's support and will to work together.

"You are what makes this force move, fight, and win," said Meyers. "232nd CSSB, well done, 83rd CSSB, welcome to the mission."



Members of the Polish military and U.S. Armed Forces wait for the beginning of the transfer of authority ceremony on March 20, 2026, in Zagan, Poland. The transfer of authority represents an event of coordinated events between an incoming unit and an outgoing unit.

Illinois Army National Guard's 33rd IBCT Recognizes Several Soldiers at Brigade Ball

The 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team's ball on Saturday, Feb. 7, in Champaign was a great success with several Soldiers recognized for their outstanding service.

Brig. Gen. Frederick Hockett, the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, of the U.S. Army Reserve Command, served as the keynote speaker at the ball.



Col. Michael R. Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, presents Col. Seth Hible, former commander of the 33rd IBCT, present Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jennifer M. Rosa with the Order of St. Maurice – Primicerius during the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team military ball Feb. 7, 2026, at the I Hotel in Champaign, Illinois, in recognition of his significant and lasting contributions to the U.S. Army Infantry.



Col. Michael R. Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team and Col. Seth Hible, former commander of the 33rd IBCT, present Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jennifer M. Rosa with the Col. Robert L. Manning Achievement Medal, in recognition of her contributions, excellence and dedication in promoting the objectives and mission of the Adjutant General's Corps

U.S. Army photos by Spc. Justin Malone, Joint Force Headquarters Public Affairs



From left, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Filipiak, Lt. Col. Edward Worman, Capt. John Kuhn, Sgt. Maj. Andrew Weldon (retired), Sgt. Maj. James Ressel, Sgt. 1st Class Lukasz Oleksak, Sgt. 1st Class Jesse Williams and Col. Michael R. Kowalski pose after Kowalski and Filipiak presented the Order of St. Maurice – Centurion during the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team military ball Feb. 7, recognizing the Soldiers' significant contributions to the Infantry.



Brigade Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Filipiak and Col. Michael R. Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, stand with Master Sgt. Aaron M. Bogacz after he received the Knowlton Award, recognizing his contributions to the Military Intelligence Corps.

Col. Michael R. Kowalski, commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Filipiak present Capt. Devin J. Tegtman with the Order of Samuel Sharpe. The Order of Samuel Sharpe is a prestigious award presented by the Ordnance Corps to recognize service and exceptional performance that significantly exceeds normal duty expectations.



State Command Chief Warrant Officer Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas R. Black is inducted into the Distinguished Order of Saint Martin in recognition of his exceptional service, professionalism and enduring contributions to the Quartermaster Corps during the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team military ball Feb. 7, 2026, at the I Hotel in Champaign, Illinois. Throughout a distinguished 38-year career, Black embodied the highest traditions of the Quartermaster Corps by demonstrating leadership, technical mastery and unwavering dedication to the sustainment mission across multiple echelons of the Army and Joint Force. Pictured from left is State Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Kelly, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, Black, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams and 34th Division Sustainment Brigade Commander Col. Beth Roxworthy.



2nd Lt. Nathaniel C. Dowell is recognized following his promotion during the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team military ball Feb. 7, 2026, at the I Hotel in Champaign, Illinois, as Col. Michael R. Kowalski, commander of the 33rd IBCT, swears him in as a new commissioned officer.



Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca, the Illinois National Guard Director of the Joint Staff, speaks with Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the Illinois Army National Guard and the Deputy Commanding General for the United States Army South (Sixth Army), at the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team Ball on Feb. 7 in Champaign, Illinois.



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General - Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, speaks with Brig. Gen. Frederick Hockett at the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team Ball on Saturday, Feb. 7, in Champaign. Brig. Gen. Hockett, the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, of the U.S. Army Reserve Command, served as the keynote speaker at the ball.

Illinois Air National Guard Judge Advocate Adjourns 27-Year Career

Being directly recruited into the Illinois National Guard by the Adjutant General is likely rarer than finding a four-leaf clover, but that's exactly how Illinois Air National Guard Brigadier General John M. (Marty) Green was recruited.

Green retired this past April after serving 27 years as a Staff Judge Advocate in the Illinois Air National Guard and in various capacities in Washington D.C.

Before joining the Illinois National Guard, Green worked as an aide to Illinois Governor Jim Edgar.

"I saw the good work the Guard was doing during the 1993 flooding in Western Illinois," said Green. "The Adjutant General at the time, General Lynn, encouraged me to consider joining the Guard when I completed law school. It was a great opportunity to serve the Guard as a Judge Advocate at the 183rd Fighter Wing."

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard said Green left a lasting legacy.

"Throughout his time in the Illinois National Guard Marty always provided thoughtful, sound counsel to leaders, his peers and subordinates," said Boyd. "His work ethic, energy and dedication continue to inspire our Airmen."

Green earned his Juris Doctorate from St. Louis University in 1996 and received a direct commission as an Air Force judge advocate in April of 1998.

"My thinking was that I would spend a couple of years serving



Brigadier General John M. (Marty) Green speaks from a podium shortly after being promoted June 20, 2023. (Courtesy photo)

to get the military experience and training that would make me a better professional," said Green. "I told myself that when it stopped being fun, I would get out."

Over the course of his 27-year career Green served as a Staff Judge Advocate at the 183rd Wing and the Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters. He served as the senior legal advisor during Hurricane Katrina response and during the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago. Most recently he served as the Air National Guard assistant to the Deputy Judge Advocate General in Washington D.C.

Green said his military service gave him a world view, which he carries on today as Senior Vice President and Legislative Counsel for the Illinois CPA Society.

"It has broadened my view

of things and to approach issues and problems more strategically. It has also disciplined me to look at issues and problems more broadly," said Green. "It has sharpened my presentation skills both in the board room and court room."

One of his roles during his time in Washington D.C. was to teach Air Force Judge Advocates about the Air National Guard and the Guard's role in the Air Force.

He said, beyond the challenging assignments, his military career provided many memorable experiences.

"Traveling to Poland with the State Partnership Program legal engagements, flying in an F-16, teaching legal issues and emergency management at the College level, and meeting some outstanding Airmen and Soldiers who serve our nation and state in an exemplary manner," Green said.

In retirement, Green said he's looking forward to not doing two jobs simultaneously.

"Spend more time with my wife and grown children, get projects done at home, and serving on the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission and the Illinois Governor's Mansion Association Board of Directors."

Springfield Community Gathers to Remember 35th Anniversary of Desert Storm Cease Fire

Brig. Gen. Steven B. Rice was a 23-year-old Staff Sergeant serving on active duty in the U.S. Air Force at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona during Operation Desert Storm.

Rice, now the Assistant Adjutant General – Air, Illinois National Guard, told the group gathered at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield, Feb. 28, to mark the 35th anniversary of the Persian Gulf War cease fire, commonly known as Operation Desert Storm, that although he didn't deploy during that time, he and his fellow Airmen were training and ready to go.

"Desert Storm demonstrated our military strengths," Rice said. "It also demonstrated the strength and resolve of our families and communities here in Illinois."

Approximately 695,000 U.S. service members deployed to the Middle East. About 400 U.S. service members lost their lives during the deployment, including 18 service members with ties to Illinois.

"Desert Storm remains one of our proudest moments," said Mark Patterson, the Field Service Manager for the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and a Persian Gulf War veteran who deployed to Saudi Arabia with the 92nd Medical Battalion. "It remains a testament to what can be achieved through international cooperation and American resolve. As part of the largest coalition of military forces since World War II, the United States stood with 38 partner nations from five continents to liberate Kuwait."

Rice reminded everyone gathered Desert Storm showcased, and what continues to be the strength of the military today is the people who wear the cloth of their nation.

"The strength of our military is our Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, Marines, Coast Guard personnel, and today we can add Space Force Guardians," he said. "Our nation's diplomatic ability to build an international coalition, and the modern precision weapons we unveiled during Desert Storm are also tremendous strengths that support our national defense



Brig. Gen. Steven B. Rice, Assistant Adjutant General-Air, Illinois National Guard, shares a story of cousins who served in the Illinois Army National Guard and were two of the nearly 1,400 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen deployed to Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm. The two cousins served with the 1644th Transportation Company in Rock Falls and transported Iraqi Prisoners during their deployment.

today."

About 1,400 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen were activated for service during Desert Storm, including transportation, medical, military police, and aerial refueling units among others.

"Two of my first cousins, Lisa and Sheri, who were 18 and 20-years old were assigned to the 1644th Transportation Company, based in Rock Falls and deployed to Saudi Arabia where they transported Iraqi Prisoners," Rice said. "I believe the last thing they thought when they joined



Don Ferricks, a volunteer at the Illinois State Military Museum, places the flag on a memorial table during the 35th annual Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony.

the Illinois National Guard is they would be deployed halfway around the world, performing the duties they were performing.”

“For several weeks leading up to the United Nations’ deadline ordering Saddam Husein to withdraw from Kuwait images and video of our service members preparing their equipment and rehearsing their drills were all over the media,” he said. “Our service members were fit professionals with high morale. Their dedication and eagerness to defend freedom and represent the United States against a tyrant and his Army inspired us and continues to inspire us today.”

Rice said Desert Storm also demonstrated America’s technological might to the rest of the world.

“Many of us remember the green and grainy night vision video of bombs, rockets, and missiles raining down on Baghdad, and anti-aircraft fire returning from the ground,” he said.

Rice said compared to other conflicts this precision approach was characterized as antiseptic.

“No matter how swift and accurate our military operations

are, they are never antiseptic,” he said. “It is personal and it is costly. As we remember Desert Storm, we must celebrate the effort and achievement of our military, and the men and women who served and sacrificed to bring victory.”

Rice said the nation must also remember and honor the families who lost a loved one in the service of our nation.

“It is our duty, as President Lincoln prompted us ‘to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan,’” he said.



Illinois Army National Guard Chaplain (Maj.) Monte Bowers delivers the invocation during the 35th Annual Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield, Feb. 28.



Jim McCabe, a volunteer with the Illinois State Military Museum, places a yellow rose in memory of one of the 18 Illinois service members who died during Desert Storm at the 35th annual Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony.

Knocking It Out of the Park

Chicago White Sox Answer Call for Replacement Memento Honoring Fallen Illinois Service Member

**Story and Photos by Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs**

It may be a tiny Chicago White Sox helmet meant to hold ice cream at the ballpark, but for one Gold Star mother, it represents the memory of an afternoon at the ballpark shared with her late son, an Illinois Army National Guard Soldier who died in service to his country.

When the small memento went missing from a memorial case honoring the 34 Illinois National Guard service members who have died in service to their country since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Chicago White Sox knocked it out of the park and answered the call to provide a replacement mini helmet.

On March 6, thanks to the Chicago White Sox, Sue King-Wieczorek, the Gold Star mother of Army Sgt. Robert M. Weinger, was presented a replacement helmet to display in the memorial case at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield and in addition, was presented a shadow box containing Weinger's medals and awards received during his service in the Illinois National Guard.

"We are honored to have you here," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General-Army, and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "I remember taking my daughter to the ballpark and her eating ice cream from the mini helmets as well."

Replacing the mini helmet was the least the Chicago White Sox could do for a Gold Star family.



The Chicago White Sox provided a replacement mini helmet for Gold Star mother Sue King-Wieczorek to place among the mementos in a memorial case at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield honoring the 34 Illinois National Guard service members who have died in service to the country since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"For generations, the White Sox have been proud to honor the service and sacrifice of the men and women who serve our country," said Michael Gomez, Chicago White Sox Director of

Game Presentation. "We recognize the incredible level of service and sacrifice that the members of the military and their families must give in order to keep us all safe."

Gomez said the White Sox were



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Sue King-Wieczorek with a Chicago White Sox mini helmet to include in the memorial case at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. King-Wieczorek is the Gold Star mother of U.S. Army Sgt. Robert M. Weinger who died of injuries sustained March 15, 2009 in Afghanistan.

humbled to play a small role in replacing the little reminder of good times past.

“White Sox baseball has always been so much more than a game. It’s been a place for families, like the family of Illinois Army National Guard Sergeant Robert Weinger, to make memories with one another,” said Gomez. “We’re humbled to play a small role to help keep those memories safe,

Sue King-Wieczorek, the Gold Star mother of Army Sgt. Robert M. Weinger, places the Chicago White Sox mini helmet in the memorial display case March 6 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. For King-Wieczorek, the mini helmet is a remembrance of an afternoon spent at the ballpark with Weinger before his Illinois Army National Guard unit deployed to Afghanistan.



even with a small memento like an ice cream helmet. We will always be grateful for the sacrifice of Sergeant Weinger and his family made."

Williams said King-Wieczorek had asked for a ribbon rack of Weinger's awards and medals, but the Illinois National Guard went the extra mile and provided the shadow box.

"It's the least we could do to honor the memory of our fallen service member," he said.

Weinger, of Round Lake Beach, Illinois, was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, based in Woodstock, when the unit was among more than 3,000 Illinois Army National

Guard Soldiers activated for service in Afghanistan in 2008. On March 15, 2009, Weinger was among four service members, including three from the Illinois Army National Guard, who were killed in action when their vehicle struck an improvised explosive device near Kot, Afghanistan.

The memorial case was displayed in the Joint Force Headquarters building on Camp Lincoln, but in recent months moved to the Illinois Military Academy so it could be viewed by everyone.

"Soldiers from all 54 states and territories, along with active-duty Soldiers come to Camp Lincoln for training and school at the Illinois

Military Academy," Williams said. "It was moved to here on purpose, so people can see it and that every generation that comes behind us sees them and remembers the price paid."

King-Wieczorek was moved by the actions of the Illinois National Guard and the Chicago White Sox.

"I can't thank you enough," she said. "This means the world to me. Bob was my first-born son. He was a troublemaker. On March 15, he will be gone for 17 years, but it still feels like yesterday. I've been trying to get a copy of his medals for a while. I reached out to you (Brig. Gen. Williams) and to The Adjutant General and boom it's done."



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Sue King-Wieczorek, Gold Star mother of U.S. Army Sgt. Robert M. Weinger, with a shadow box containing Weinger's medals he earned during his military service in the Illinois Army National Guard. Also pictured are King-Wieczorek's husband, Ray, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Kelly, State Command Sergeant Major, and Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, Command Chief Warrant Officer of the Illinois National Guard. Weinger is one of 34 Illinois National Guard service members who gave their lives in service to their country since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Illinois National Guard Honors Former Guardsman Abe Lincoln

The Illinois National Guard paid tribute to its most notable militiaman and 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, during a ceremony at his tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 12, marking the 217th anniversary of his birth.

U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, presented a wreath on behalf of President Donald J. Trump as part of the 92nd National American Legion Pilgrimage to Lincoln's tomb.

"Abraham Lincoln is the most celebrated Illinois Guardsman," Boyd said. "Captain Lincoln served in the 1830s during the Blackhawk War."

Boyd was carrying on a tradition that began in 1967 when President Lyndon Baines Johnson sent wreaths to be presented at the graves of his predecessors on their birthdays. Each year, wreaths of red, white, and blue flowers are sent to the burial places of all deceased presidents on the anniversary of their birthday.

"Lincoln's integrity, leadership and wisdom still saturates the

ranks of our Army and Air National Guard and the fabric of our country 161-years after his death," Boyd said.

Boyd told the approximately 150 people who assembled for the ceremony that Lincoln has particular significance for the Illinois National

Guard because he served as a captain in the Illinois State Militia during the Blackhawk War.

"Our guardsmen draw inspiration from Lincoln," Boyd said. "Lincoln served at the lowest levels of a military unit, and at the very top as our Commander-in-Chief."



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, renders a salute after placing a wreath at the tomb of President Abraham Lincoln on behalf of the President of the United States Feb. 12 as part of the 92nd annual American Legion Pilgrimage to Lincoln's Tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois.



At left, Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, delivers remarks at the tomb of President Abraham Lincoln, Feb. 12 at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, after placing a wreath as part of the 92nd annual American Legion Pilgrimage to Lincoln's Tomb. Lincoln served in the Illinois Militia during the Blackhawk War as a captain.

Small Store, Big Impact:

Illinois National Guard Unit Runs Exchange Service at Tip of Spear

**Story and Photos by
Master Sgt. Caleb Barrieau
Army & Air Force Exchange Service HQ**

At the tip of the spear, where Soldiers operate from small, dispersed sites far from large installations, even limited resources can make a meaningful difference.

Across Poland, many forward operating sites host fewer than 300 Soldiers and lack the population or infrastructure to support a full Army Air Force Exchange Service operated store. At Forward Operating Site Karliki, the unit-run Authorized Imprest Fund Activity (AIFA) PX has become a vital Quality-of-Life resource, delivering everyday necessities and a boost to morale in an austere environment where mission requirements come first.

“This is a forward operating site, it’s not as built up as a base,” said Capt. Alissa Mendez, Headquarters and Headquarters company commander and AIFA officer in charge. “A lot of Soldiers here don’t really have access to town unless they’re walking or taking a taxi, and that’s not always realistic, especially in the cold or when it gets dark early.”

Imprest fund activity sites are operated by military personnel, typically in remote or austere locations where a full-service Exchange is not feasible. These small, unit-run stores carry a limited inventory, generally valued at less than \$15,000, with approved exceptions up to \$50,000 and can operate indefinitely in coordination with a supporting Exchange general manager.

Proceeds from sales are used to replenish merchandise, while the unit assumes responsibility for ordering and transporting products,



Soldiers assigned to Forward Operating Site Karliki stand outside the unit-run Authorized Imprest Fund Activity (AIFA) PX in Poland, Dec. 17, 2025. From left to right: Sgt. Steven Tsui, a PX clerk; Spc. Kevin Schreier, PX manager; Capt. Alissa Mendez, Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander and PX officer in charge; and Staff Sgt. Jacob Whited, PX noncommissioned officer in charge. The small, Exchange-supported store provides Soldiers at the austere forward operating site with everyday necessities and morale-boosting comforts where access to full Army & Air Force Exchange Service facilities is limited.

ensuring Soldiers continue to have access to essential items despite their distance from larger installations.

“Requests for AIFA sites are submitted by the unit through their higher headquarters and outline projected personnel strength, location and sustainment capabilities,” said Lt. Col. Mitchell Brooks, the Exchange’s Europe Region chief of Contingency

Operations and Plans “That information allows the Exchange to plan and execute support in a timely manner, ensuring Soldiers have access to essential Exchange services even in the most austere environments.”

At Karliki, PX means immediate access to hygiene items, snacks, drinks and small comforts that would otherwise take weeks to arrive by mail. The Exchange has



Spc. Kevin Schreier, an Illinois Army National Guard Soldier and PX manager assigned to Forward Operating Site Karliki, processes a purchase for a fellow Soldier inside the unit-run Authorized Imprest Fund Activity (AIFA) PX in Poland, Dec. 17, 2025. Supported by the Army & Air Force Exchange Service, the Soldier-operated store provides essential items and morale-boosting comforts at the austere forward operating site, where access to full Exchange facilities is limited.

10 imprest fund sites in the Europe, Africa and Southwest Asia.

“The PX is such a big contributor to morale,” Mendez said. “It’s your comfort food, your comfort items. You’re away from home, sometimes for the first time, and this is one of the ways we can make this feel like home now.”

Since the store opened in January 2024, leaders have focused on keeping it responsive to Soldiers’ needs, a priority Mendez reinforced when she arrived on ground in July 2025. “We really came in with the mindset of, ‘What is going to sell best for troops? What do Soldiers actually want?’” Mendez said. “We put up a board and asked them directly.”

That feedback-driven approach shapes everything from what is stocked to how often products rotate. “We’ll test new items weekly,” she said. “Sometimes we’ll take a product off the shelf for a month and bring it back later. Soldiers notice that. They’ll say, ‘Oh my gosh, my thing’s back.’ It keeps interest up.”

Executing that vision on the

ground is Staff Sgt. Jacob Whited, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge. A vehicle mechanic by trade, Whited manages the store, alongside a few other Soldiers, with the same discipline he brings to maintenance operations.

“This is a convenience for Soldiers on our FOS,” Whited said. “It keeps them from having to go into town, pay for a taxi and try to get basic necessities. That alone increases morale.”

Organization and accountability are central to how the store operates. “We don’t put food on the floor, only sealed drinks if we have excess,” he said. “We’re trying to keep it clean and safe. Little things like that matter.”

Inside the small store, shelves are arranged to create flow. “We wanted it to be functional,” Whited said. “Home and health here, food here, drinks here, so Soldiers know exactly where to go instead of searching around.”

That attention to detail builds trust, and Soldiers respond. “You see it in the group chats,” Whited said. “People talk about how it’s

nice that the PX actually has stock.”

For Soldiers living in tents or rotating through the site, that reliability is essential. “If a Soldier is running out of soap or toothpaste, they know they can come here instead of waiting four weeks for a package from home,” Whited said.

The store also serves as a leadership and development platform.

“We use this for volunteer hours,” Whited said. “Weekends and non-duty hours are all volunteer time. Soldiers get promotion points, ribbons and experience running something that actually matters.”

Mendez sees ownership as a force multiplier. “Almost everybody on this FOS goes through the PX at least once a day,” she said. “So, if we’re making it a warm environment, music playing, decorations up, it gives Soldiers something to look forward to.”

Those small touches resonate. “If someone’s having a bad day, they’ll say, ‘Let me just go grab my energy drink,’” Mendez said. “That matters more than people realize.”

As both a commander and the FOS mayor for the Army side of the installation, Mendez views the store as inseparable from mission readiness.

“At the end of the day, it’s what you can provide for Soldiers that makes them feel taken care of,” she said. “That’s how you keep them focused and resilient.”

When asked whether the AIFA store should continue after her unit redeploys, Mendez was unequivocal. “Oh, 100%,” she said. “In an austere environment like this, there’s only so much you can provide. This fills a critical gap.”

Whited echoed that sentiment for other units considering a similar capability.

“Absolutely go for it,” he said. “It builds morale, gives Soldiers ownership and makes the camp better for everyone.”



Allies and partners gather for a group photo after the Brave Band 2026 Exercise. The Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian Brigade (LITPOLUKRBRIG) conducted Exercise Brave Band 2026 from Jan. 25 to Feb. 6, an annual battle staff training event designed to enhance the brigade headquarters' ability to plan, synchronize, and execute multinational operations in a complex operational environment. The exercise included service members from the Illinois National Guard, the Pennsylvania Guard National Guard and the California National Guard. Through the State Partnership Program, the Illinois National Guard is partnered with Poland, the Pennsylvania National Guard is partnered with Lithuania, and the California National Guard is partnered with Ukraine. (Courtesy photo.)

Brave Band 2026 Strengthens Multinational Readiness as U.S. National Guard Marks 11 Years of Partnership

The Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian Brigade (LITPOLUKRBRIG) conducted Exercise Brave Band 2026 from Jan. 25 to Feb. 6, an annual battle staff training event designed to enhance the brigade headquarters' ability to plan, synchronize, and execute multinational operations in a complex operational environment.

This year's exercise also marked 11 consecutive years of participation by the National Guard, with mentors from the Illinois, Pennsylvania, and California National Guard continuing a long-standing partnership aimed at strengthening multinational headquarters effectiveness. Through the State Partnership Program, the Illinois National Guard is partnered with Poland, the Pennsylvania National

Guard is partnered with Lithuania, and the California National Guard is partnered with Ukraine.

"Experience in working with the brigade was enlightening to see how universal military concepts are incorporated amongst the various nations," said California National Guard Sgt. Timothy Davis, GIS Coordinator and Intel Analyst. "Brave Band 26 was a fantastic opportunity to train and learn with our partners."

Brave Band 2026 focused on staff integration, operational planning, and mission command across the brigade headquarters, reinforcing interoperability among Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian personnel while incorporating lessons learned from contemporary operations.

"It was great to be back in

Poland training with our partners in the LITPOLUKR brigade. Every visit reaffirms how much progress we've made together and how much potential still lies ahead," said Lt. Col. Paul McConkey, Illinois National Guard Selective Service Officer and Maneuver Lead for the exercise.

Illinois National Guard Col. Tim Newman, the Strategic Plans and International Affairs Officer (J5), has trained with the LITPOLUKRBRIG four times, "This exercise continues to demonstrate the strength of the National Guard State Partnership Program as it builds multinational partnership security and capacity. It truly emulates the LITPOLUKR Brigades motto, 'United for Peace.'"

From Soldier Care to Leadership

Gonzalez Retires After 23 Years

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

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Lt. Col. Lionel Gonzalez during a retirement ceremony Feb. 22 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln. The ceremony recognized more than 23 years of service to the state of Illinois and the nation.

Hosted by Col. Paul Metzдорff, commander of the 129th Regiment, the ceremony celebrated Gonzalez's career of leadership, mentorship and dedication to Soldier care.

Gonzalez enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard as an infantryman on Feb. 14, 2003, under the Split Training Option Program. After completing basic combat training following his freshman year of college, he later graduated as a Distinguished Military Graduate from the Reserve Officers' Training Corps program at Wheaton College and earned his commission as an infantry officer in May 2006.

Over the course of his career, Gonzalez served in a wide range of leadership positions, including platoon leader, executive officer, company commander, battalion S-1, instructor and platoon trainer for Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School, battalion training group officer in charge supporting deployment operations to Ukraine from 2020 to 2021, and S-2/3 for the 65th Troop Command. He deployed to Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009 in support of Provincial Reconstruction Team operations in Kapisa and Parwan provinces.

Most recently, Gonzalez served as commander of 2nd Battalion,



Col. Paul Metzдорff, commander of the 129th Regiment, presents Lt. Col. Lionel Gonzalez with a signed retirement letter during Gonzalez's retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 22, 2026. Gonzalez retired after more than 23 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard.

129th Regional Training Institute. In that role, he oversaw military occupational specialty transition courses, Noncommissioned Officer Education System advanced and senior leader courses, Officer Candidate School, Modern Army Combatives training, Combat Lifesaver courses and pre-command courses. His leadership directly influenced the development of future Illinois Army National Guard officers and noncommissioned officers.

"When a Soldier spoke to him, he listened," said Sgt. 1st Class Bobbie Reavis, master of ceremonies. "He asked follow-up questions. He remembered details. Soldiers knew they mattered."

Col. Paul Metzдорff, Commander of the 129th Regional Training Institute, highlighted Gonzalez's reputation for accountability and personal

investment in those he led.

"He understands that our greatest strength in the Illinois Army National Guard is our people," Metzдорff said. "His mentorship and example will continue to shape leaders long after his retirement."

In his remarks, Gonzalez reflected on the highs and hardships of his career and expressed gratitude for the Soldiers he served alongside and the teams he was privileged to lead.

"I couldn't have done it without the support of my family," Gonzalez said. "The Army is the only thing I've done longer than being with my wife."

As he transitions into retirement, Gonzalez encouraged others to continue telling their Army story and to inspire the next generation of service members.

US, Italy Commemorate Anniversary of Anzio Landing

Story by Capt. Katherine Sibilla
U.S. Army Southern European TF, Africa

U.S. Army Master Sgt. Joshua Van Horn walked through the curved rows of white marble crosses at the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery, his steps slowing as he searched for a familiar unit. His eyes settled on the headstones of Soldiers from the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

Van Horn grazed his hand across the smooth marble and paused at the grave of Pvt. James Warren, the name etched permanently into the stone.

Van Horn once served in the 504th PIR himself, deploying with the unit to Afghanistan. Standing among the graves of fellow “Devils in Baggy Pants” offered a moment to reflect not only on their sacrifice, but on his own service.

“Coming here gives you a sense of purpose,” Van Horn said. “It reminds me why we do what we do.”

Van Horn participated in the 82nd anniversary commemoration of Operation Shingle at the cemetery



A memorial marking the Allied landings at Anzio stands in tribute to the Soldiers who took part in the January 1944 amphibious assault aimed at breaking the German defensive line in Italy, during the 82nd Anniversary of the Battle of Anzio in Anzio, Italy, Jan. 22, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jude Vogel)

ILNG Chaplain Supports 3rd ID's Commemoration of WWII Anzio Landing

Illinois Army National Guard Chaplain (Capt.) Aaron Melman of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion supported the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division and the American Battle Monuments Commission on Jan. 22-23 during commemorations of the 82nd anniversary of the 3rd Infantry Division's landings at Anzio and Nettuno during World War II.

The events in Italy honored fallen Soldiers, engaged with stakeholders, and reinforced the 3rd Infantry Division's heritage through ceremonial, educational, and commemorative events.



U.S. Army Chaplain Aaron Melman, assigned to 232 Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (left) speaks to U.S. Army Brig. Gen. John Lubas, Commanding General of the 3rd Infantry Division at Anzio, Italy, Jan 22, 2026. Eighty-two years after the Battle of Anzio, the 3rd Infantry Division reflects on the operation's impact and the Soldiers who endured months of intense combat. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jude Vogel)

in Nettuno, Italy, Jan. 22. He led the 173rd Airborne Brigade honor guard during the ceremony, which honored the service and sacrifice of U.S. and Allied forces who fought during the World War II landings at Anzio and Nettuno.

“This cemetery is a testament to what makes America great,” Van Horn continued. “Eighty-two years later, these graves are still cared for. What other country does that? Honoring Soldiers who died liberating others.”

U.S. and Italian officials delivered remarks throughout the ceremony, including U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See (Vatican City) Bryant Burch, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonio Tajani, and U.S. Army Maj. Gen. John Rafferty, chief of staff of U.S. European Command.

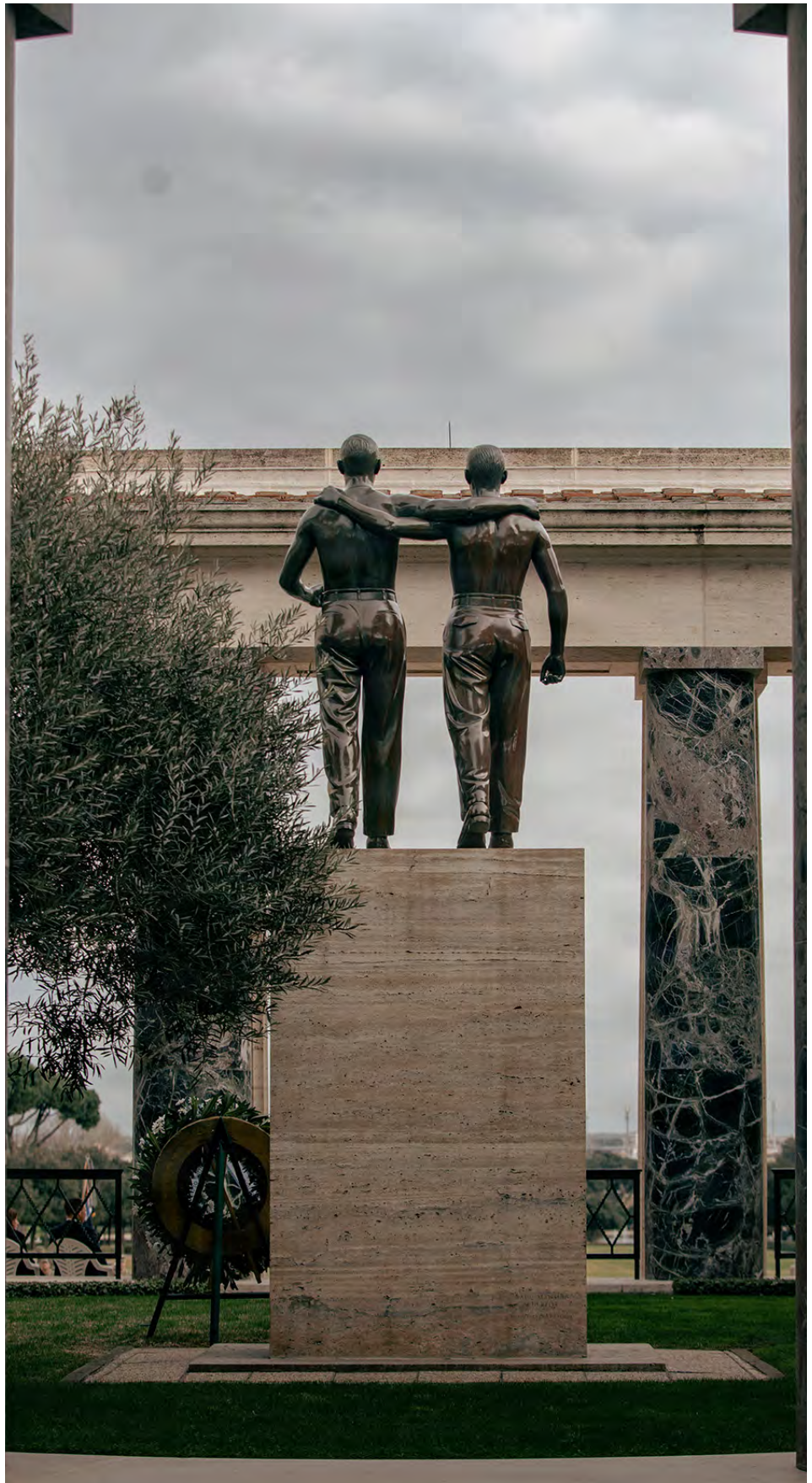
Local students from Nettuno schools sang, read poetry, and laid roses in remembrance of those buried at the cemetery, followed by a ceremonial wreath-laying. The ceremony also honored the life of 1st Lt. Carl Hood, the first service member buried at the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery.

Speakers echoed the message that the cemetery is not only a resting place for the fallen, but a space meant to guide the living. Burch and Rafferty also reflected on the upcoming 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and its continued relevance.

“Two hundred and fifty years of dedication to a universal proposition, grounded in human dignity and fundamental rights, that we continue to strive to live up to,” Burch said. “Marking this day during such a historic anniversary carries even greater significance.”

As the ceremony concluded, Van Horn and others moved quietly through the rows of marble crosses and Stars of David, reflecting on the cost of freedom.

These cemeteries are not only places of mourning. They are places of memory meant to remind the living what service demands, and what liberty costs.



The 82nd anniversary commemoration of Operation Shingle honored the service and sacrifice of U.S. and Allied forces who fought during the World War II landings at Anzio and Nettuno. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Katherine Sibilla)

Helfrich Relinquishes Command of 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade to McPherson

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

The Illinois Army National Guard's 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade formally transferred leadership during a Change of Command ceremony Jan. 10, during the 404th's Brigade Ball in Normal.

The ceremony marked the official transition of command from Col. David Helfrich to Col. Jessica McPherson, symbolizing the passing of responsibility, authority, and trust for nearly 1,900 Soldiers assigned to the brigade.

Presided over by Brig. Gen. Michael Eastridge, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the Illinois Army National Guard, the ceremony followed Army tradition as the brigade colors were passed from Command Sgt. Maj. Sarah Roman to the outgoing commander, then to the reviewing officer, and finally to Col. Jessica McPherson. The passing of the colors represents the continuity of command and the unbroken bond between Soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and their commander.

Family members of both commanders were recognized during the ceremony with the presentation of roses, a longstanding Change of Command tradition symbolizing strength, support, and the enduring role families play in a Soldier's service. Loved ones of Col. Helfrich and Col. McPherson were honored for their commitment to the brigade and the Soldiers it serves.

During his tenure, Col. Helfrich led the 404th MEB through multiple domestic and overseas missions, including deployments



Brigade leadership stands center stage during a Change of Command ceremony for the Illinois Army National Guard's 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade during the brigade ball in Normal, Illinois, Jan. 10, 2026. The ceremony formally transferred command from Col. David Helfrich to Col. Jessica McPherson, symbolizing the passage of authority and responsibility for the brigade.

*U.S. Army photos by Sgt. David Ervin
404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade
Illinois Army National Guard*

to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Fort Greely, Alaska, and the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, as well as COVID-19 response operations and Task Force Chicago. Under his leadership, the brigade supported national security missions, large-scale joint training exercises, and high-profile homeland security operations, including the 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

“It has been an immense honor to lead and serve alongside the dedicated Soldiers of the 404th MEB,” said Helfrich. “I am deeply grateful for the trust placed in me, which allowed me the privilege of experiencing such an extraordinary opportunity. The Soldiers of this brigade are the epitome of professionalism, and they truly embody the values and strength of our communities, our state, and our nation. I have the utmost confidence in Col. McPherson’s leadership, and I eagerly anticipate watching how she will guide the brigade into the future.”

McPherson now assumes command of a brigade uniquely structured to provide maneuver support, security, and technical expertise through its Engineer, Military Police, Chemical, and Signal units. She emphasized the significance of the moment and the responsibility entrusted to her as commander.

“I am honored and extremely proud to be leading this brigade at this time,” said McPherson. “Because we are at an important time in our world’s history, our nation’s history, and our military’s history, it is critical that we remain prepared and adaptable.”

She also recognized the leadership of her predecessor, noting that “Colonel Helfrich laid a great foundation upon which I could build.”

“As commander, it is my job to ensure that no matter the direction or path, this brigade is ready for whatever the future brings,” McPherson said. “I’m excited about what’s in store for our brigade, and I am honored to lead the Dragon Soldiers of the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade into the future.”



Col. David Helfrich, outgoing commander of the Illinois Army National Guard’s 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, delivers remarks during the brigade’s Change of Command ceremony at the 404th’s Brigade Ball in Normal, Jan. 10. Helfrich concluded his command after leading the brigade through domestic operations, overseas deployments, and large-scale training missions.



Col. Jessica McPherson, incoming commander of the Illinois Army National Guard’s 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, addresses Soldiers and guests following the Change of Command ceremony during the brigade ball in Normal, Jan. 10. McPherson assumed command of the brigade, which provides maneuver support and security capabilities across the state and abroad.

Illinois Army National Guard Commander Honors Captain Walter Dyett Award Recipient

*Story and Photos by
Sgt. 1st Class Robert R. Adams
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs*

The life and legacy of Illinois Army National Guard Capt. Walter H. Dyett was celebrated March 2 at the Walter H. Dyett High School for the Fine Arts with the presentation of the 2026 Capt. Walter H. Dyett Award.

Dyett High School student Aaron Benjamin was honored as the 2026 recipient of the Captain Walter H. Dyett Award for best emulating the characteristics of Captain Walter H. Dyett, including discipline, dedication, hard work and creativity. The award is co-sponsored by the 8th Infantry Regiment Illinois National Guard Association and the National Guard Association of Illinois. Benjamin also received a monetary award from the 8th Infantry Regiment Association.

Dyett led the Illinois National Guard's 8th Infantry Regiment Band, part of the famous all African-American "Fighting" 8th Infantry Regiment. For more than three decades, Dyett taught music in Chicago Public Schools, first at Wendell Phillips High School and later at DuSable High School. From 1935 to 1962, he instructed more than 20,000 students in classical, military and jazz music and mentored many of our nation's jazz greats, including Nat King Cole, Dorothy Donegan, Joseph Jarman, Dinah Washington, Johnny Griffin, Mwata Bowden and several others.

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, represented Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois, and



Illinois Army National Guard Commander Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams poses for a photo with Walter H. Dyett High School for the Fine Arts student Aaron Benjamin, the 2026 recipient of the Captain Walter H. Dyett Award on March 2 at the high school. The Captain Walter H. Dyett Award, co-sponsored by the 8th Infantry Regiment Illinois National Guard Association and the National Guard Association of Illinois, is awarded to the student who best emulates the characteristics of Captain Walter H. Dyett, including discipline, dedication, hard work and creativity.

spoke on behalf of more than 13,000 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen.

"Students in this room are our future leaders," Williams said. "Captain Dyett's motto was, 'You are what you think you are.' If you think you are a leader, you are a leader."

Dyett fostered the growth of jazz and musicians in Chicago, leading ensembles such as the Pickford Orchestra, the Washington Park summer concerts, the DuSable-ites and the "Hi-Jinks." Williams highlighted Dyett's broader influence beyond

music.

"More than music, he taught life skills - mental toughness, self-respect and discipline," Williams said. "He inspired thousands to make this community and this nation better."

Williams also spoke about the historic legacy of the "Fighting Eighth," the all-Black 8th Infantry Regiment that mobilized for the Spanish-American War and later served with distinction in World War I and World War II. Today, that lineage continues through the Illinois Army National Guard's 178th Infantry Regiment

headquartered at the General Jones Armory near Washington Park, where Dyett and his students once performed summer concerts.

Illinois National Guard veterans formed the Illinois National Guard 8th Infantry Association to preserve the legacy of the regiment. Retired Maj. Ronald Murdock, president of the association, attended along with fellow members.

William Brandon McClellan, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, lifelong educator and contemporary of Dyett, shared personal reflections with students.

“If it wasn’t for Cap, there wouldn’t be me,” McClellan said. “There are only two ways to play music – right and perfect. Perfect is an absolute, but we can work toward it.”

McClellan encouraged students to continue pursuing excellence in music and leadership.

Zaveola Coleman, chairperson of the 8th Infantry Association Scholarship Committee, reminded

students of Dyett’s philosophy.

“If you think you can, you can,” Coleman said. “If you want to be the best, you have to will yourself to do it.”

The ceremony featured musical selections performed jointly by the Dyett High School Band and the Illinois Army National Guard’s 144th Army Band.

Williams reaffirmed the Illinois National Guard’s enduring commitment to the South Side of Chicago and the preservation of the historic General Jones Armory. “Captain Dyett’s impact on this school, this community and our military will never be forgotten,” Williams said. “His legacy lives on in each of you.”



The Illinois Army National Guard’s 144th Army Band and the Walter H. Dyett High School for Fine Arts play a musical selection during the fourth annual Captain Walter H. Dyett award ceremony.



Walter H. Dyett High School for the Fine Arts student Aaron Benjamin, the 2026 recipient of the Captain Walter H. Dyett Award, poses for a photo with Illinois Army National Guard Commander Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Walter H. Dyett High School for the Fine Arts Principal Doreatha Butler, award-winning educator William McClellan, and 8th Infantry Regiment Association President Ronald Murdock with other members of the 8th Infantry Association on March 2 at the high school.

Fellow Veterans, Family Gather to Remember Soldier who Died During Annual Training

**Story and Photos by Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs**

Deb Kash described her son, Spc. Benjamin Kash, as “everyone’s big brother” and “someone who looked out for others.”

“It just made sense for him to enlist in the Illinois National Guard and continue the protection of others,” said Kash at a remembrance gathering in honor of Spc. Benjamin Kash at the Waltonville, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post March 14.

Spc. Benjamin Kash, the oldest of five children of Randy and Debbie Kash, enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1996, serving with 3rd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, then based at Mount Vernon, Illinois. On June 5, 1999, Kash died in an accident during the unit’s annual training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

“He was looking forward to this training,” Deb said. “He had met some Army Rangers during the first time the unit trained at Fort Campbell. Before he left for this annual training, we had lunch, our last lunch together, and told me he had decided to go active duty in the U.S. Army. He said it’s where he wanted to be.”

Kash was a three-sport athlete at Waltonville High School, where he graduated in 1997. He played baseball and basketball, but Deb said he really loved football.

“His dad, Randy, told him football is about being a team. They depend on each other on the field,” Deb said. “I guess it was the same joining the military. The people you serve with depend on you to have their backs.”

Not quite 18 when he enlisted, Deb had to sign for Benjamin to enlist in the Illinois Army National Guard.

“I didn’t want to sign the paperwork for him to enlist in the Illinois National Guard,” she said. “I saw the determination and his desire to join, so I signed his enlistment documents.”

The idea of a remembrance event came about from the Survivor Outreach Services Hannibal, Missouri Riverboat tour, in which the Kashes have participated in the past couple of years.

“Sheila (Forristall, the Survivor Outreach Services coordinator for southern Illinois) asked if we would like to have a gathering so those who served with Ben could remember him as well,” Deb said. “It is wonderful to see so many people here today.”

Mark Howe, the unit’s Readiness Noncommissioned Officer in 1999, said Kash was an awesome Soldier.

“He never shied away from



Veterans of 3rd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment gather with Andrew Kash, son of Spc. Benjamin Kash, during a remembrance event at the Waltonville, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9153 March 14. Spc. Kash was serving in the Illinois Army National Guard when he died June 5, 1999 during the unit’s annual training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Andrew was nine-months-old when his father died.

getting dirty," he said. "He didn't realize the example he made for the other Soldiers. He just wanted to do a good job."

Howe said Kash always put in the extra time doing his job.

"He was one of the good kids," Howe said. "The entire unit was devastated when he died."

Howe said because this was prior to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the young Soldiers hadn't experienced the loss of a fellow Soldier.

"Loss wasn't commonplace," Howe said. "Kash's loss was absolutely the exception."

After a few days back home to attend their brother-in-arms' funeral, the unit returned to Fort Campbell to complete annual training and then returned home.

Howe said one Soldier in particular had a very difficult time

in dealing with Kash's death, but with help, and time, was able to fulfill his military service.

"You can't train to accept loss," Howe said. "You can only train to deal with it."

For Kash's son, Andrew, who was nine-months-old when his father died, seeing the about 90 people gather to remember his father is an incredible feeling.

"It was awesome to see so many people here to remember him," Andrew said. "It's an incredible feeling to know even after almost 27 years, that people still remember him and are willing to share stories about their time together."

Although Kash died almost 27 years ago, his four siblings haven't forgotten what he meant to them and always share stories of their brother with their own children.



Spc. Benjamin Kash's U.S. Army basic training photo was displayed at the Waltonville, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9153 March 14 for the Spc. Benjamin Kash Remembrance gathering.



The family of Spc. Benjamin Kash, including son Andrew, gathers around his U.S. Army basic training photo during a remembrance event at Waltonville, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9153 March 14.

“His nieces and nephews ask a lot of questions about him,” Deb said. “Although his two brothers and two sisters were younger when he died, they always talk about him with their own children, and they make a point to stop at his gravesite when they are in town.”

For the members of Waltonville VFW Post 9153, it was an obvious decision when the opportunity came up to host the event.

“Ben was a good buddy,” said Benjamin Newborn, Waltonville Quartermaster and District 13 Senior Vice Commander. “We grew up together, and we served together in the Illinois National Guard.”

Newborn said in many communities, especially small communities like Waltonville with a population less than 500, Veterans Service Organizations like the VFW are often the heart of the community.



A memorial tribute was displayed at the Waltonville, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9153 March 14 for the Spc. Benjamin Kash Remembrance gathering.

“When the family started talking about an event, we stepped up and volunteered to host,” Newborn said. “It’s the least we could do for the family of someone who died in service to his country.

To see so many people come out today is very humbling to say the least. It makes me very proud to be part of an organization who steps up to do something like this.”



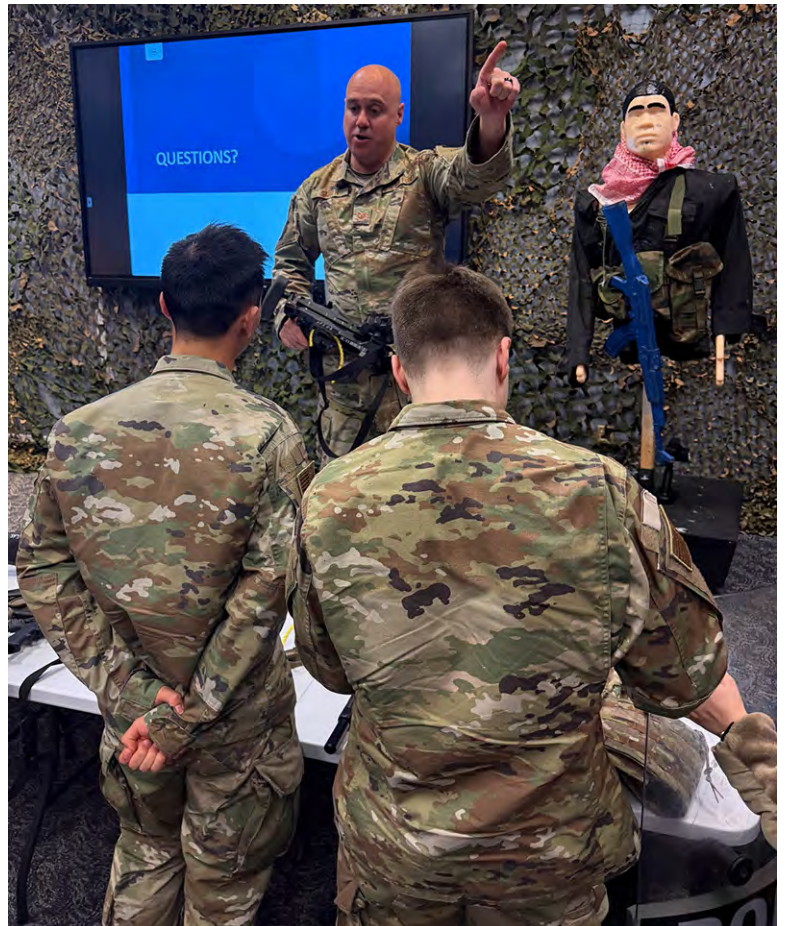
Ervin Honored with Order of the Sphinx

Brig. Gen. Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army, Illinois Army National Guard, presented Maj. Spencer Ervin, 65th Troop Command Brigade officer-in-charge, with the Order of the Sphinx during the Illinois National Guard Military Intelligence Workshop. Awarded by the Military Intelligence Corps Association, the Order of the Sphinx recognizes sustained excellence and significant long-term contributions to the Military Intelligence Corps.



182nd Airlift Wing Hosts Air Force ROTC Cadets

The University of Illinois Air Force ROTC Detachment 190 toured the 182nd Airlift Wing Feb. 20. The Wing shared the mission of the 182nd Airlift Wing and showcased the important work of the 182nd Civil Engineer Squadron and the 182nd Security Forces Squadron, and discussed how Air National Guard members operate alongside Active Duty counterparts as part of the Total Force, combining strengths to deliver airpower whenever and wherever it's needed.



Illinois Army National Guard Field Artillery Unit Holds Open House in Sycamore



A soldier of Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment shows Terra, a local student, how to properly position themselves behind a 240B, squad automatic weapon, while their brother Devan, a local student, acts as the spotter using the thermal optics at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7.



Members of the Ensign family(center) try a meal, ready-to-eat for lunch at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7. Alpha Battery, 2-122nd Field Artillery teamed with the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Command to hold an open house so that members of the public could come in and see and experience what members of their unit do.



Sgt. Juan Carlos Vargas, a chemical biological radiological nuclear noncommissioned officer with Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment, demonstrates to Donnie Spaniol (center) and Mike Miller (left) how to ensure that they have a good seal while wearing an M50 gas mask at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7.



Sgt 1st Class James Nelson, a gunner sergeant with Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment, explains and assists AJ Spear in loading a dummy round into an M119A3 Howitzer at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7.



Soldiers of Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment show members of the local community how to use a 240B, squad automatic weapon, with optics on it at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7.



Sgt 1st Class James Nelson, a gunner sergeant with Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 122nd Field Artillery Regiment, explains to his parents how to read the changes made when moving the tube on the M119A3 howitzer at the Sycamore Armory on Feb. 7.

Photos by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Polish Partners Visit Camp Lincoln

Officers from the Polish Territorial Defence Forces visited Camp Lincoln in Feb. The exchange recognized the continued cooperation and shared commitment between the Illinois National Guard and Poland's Territorial Defence Forces to strengthen readiness and interoperability.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and commander of the Illinois National Guard, speaks with Maj. Gen. Dr. Krzysztof Stańczyk, commander of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces, and senior leaders during a partnership meeting at Camp Lincoln in Springfield.



Maj. Gen. Dr. Krzysztof Stańczyk, commander of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces, speaks with Illinois National Guard senior leaders during a partnership meeting at Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 4. The visit focused on strengthening cooperation, sharing best practices, and enhancing interoperability between allied forces.



A member of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces views historical artifacts and exhibits during a tour of the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 4. The visit included discussions on shared military history and provided an opportunity to strengthen partnerships between the Illinois National Guard and Poland's Territorial Defence Forces.

U.S. Army photos by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche, Joint Force Headquarters - Illinois National Guard



Maj. David Wachtveitl, G37 Collective Training Branch Chief, Illinois National Guard, briefs a member of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces on training capabilities during a facility tour at Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 4.



Brig. Gen. Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army, Illinois National Guard, speaks with Maj. Gen. Dr. Krzysztof Stańczyk, commander of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces discussing training capabilities and opportunities to strengthen cooperation and interoperability between the two allied forces.



Maj. Gen. Dr. Krzysztof Stańczyk, commander of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces, participates in a weapons familiarization exercise using a virtual training simulator during a visit to Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 4. The hands-on demonstration allowed leaders to observe Illinois National Guard training capabilities and exchange best practices to strengthen readiness and interoperability between allied forces.

Macomb-based Army National Guard Engineer Unit Completes Mission in Middle East, Returns to Illinois

More than 150 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's 661st Engineer Construction Company returned to Illinois this month after completing their mission in the Middle East.

About 50 Soldiers returned on February 7 and the remaining approximately 100 Soldiers returned on February 14 (Valentine's Day). Both groups flew into Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport's Stellar Aviation in Springfield to throngs of family and friends.

While deployed, the unit was based in Kuwait and built and maintained infrastructure for U.S. Forces serving in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility.

The unit, led by Capt. Larnell Brown and 1st Sgt. Jacob Stegall, mobilized on Aug 24, 2025, and held its mobilization ceremony in front of a crowd of several

hundred family and well-wishers at Macomb High School.

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.



Approximately 100 Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard's Macomb-based 661st Engineer Construction Company returned to Illinois from about 6-months in the Middle East on Feb. 14. The Soldiers landed at the Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport's Stellar Aviation in Springfield to throngs of family and friends. The unit built and maintained infrastructure for U.S. Forces serving in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility.

Illinois Army National Guard Honors Master Sgt. Steven Reese Upon Retirement

*Story and Photos by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouché
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs*

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Master Sgt. Steven Reese during a retirement ceremony Feb. 12 at Marseilles Training Center recognizing his 23 years of service.

Master Sgt. Reese began his career in 2003 as an Indirect Fire Infantryman with the 75th Ranger Regiment, deploying multiple times in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. He later continued his service in the Illinois Army National Guard, serving in leadership roles including Recruiter, Training NCO, First Sergeant, and Operations NCO with the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion.

His career was recognized with the Meritorious Service Medal and retirement honors, while his family was also recognized for their support throughout his service.

The Illinois National Guard thanks Master Sgt. Reese for his dedication and wishes him and his family the best in retirement.



Master Sgt. Steven Reese stands at attention following the presentation of the Meritorious Service Medal during his retirement ceremony at Marseilles Training Center, Feb. 12.



Illinois Army National Guard leaders present Master Sgt. Steven Reese with his Certificate of Retirement during a ceremony at Marseilles Training Center, Feb. 12.

Guard Officer Retires After 32 years; Has No Plans to Give Spouse's Liver Back

*Story and Photos by
Spc. Justin Malone*

Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

After more than three decades of service to the state and nation, Lt. Col. Justin Wilkerson, Deputy Joint Operations Officer of the Illinois National Guard, has retired.

"Your dedication to our service members and genuine concern for their well-being has been unmatched," said Col. Matthew Garrison, the Illinois National Guard's Chief of the Joint Staff and Director of Strategic Plans and Policies, during the March 7 retirement ceremony on Camp Lincoln in Springfield. "You leave behind not only a record of achievement but a generation of leaders who are better for having served with you."

Wilkerson served in the military for 32 years. His career is marked by leadership, operational deployments, and personal resilience. While some might consider serving three decades in the military heroic, Wilkerson has his own personal hero; his spouse of 20 years, Mary.

We all might say that we keep a piece of our loved ones with us wherever we go. For Justin Wilkerson, it is quite literal.

Wilkerson was commander of the 33rd Military Police Battalion in 2020 and had just concluded leading a state active-duty mission assisting law enforcement during civil disturbances in Chicago and the surrounding areas after the killing of George Floyd. During the mission, Illinois National Guard Soldiers helped secure the city's downtown area as well as other infrastructure in the city and



Lt. Col. Justin Wilkerson of the Illinois Army National Guard delivers remarks during his retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield, Illinois, March 7. Wilkerson retired after 32 years of service marked by leadership, operational deployments and dedication to Soldiers across the state. A devoted husband and father of three, Wilkerson said he plans to spend the next several months traveling and making memories with his family following his retirement.

surrounding communities.

Shortly after the mission concluded, Wilkerson was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease that caused liver failure and required a transplant. Despite the diagnosis, he continued serving in command while undergoing treatment. In August 2021, Wilkerson received a life-saving liver transplant from Mary, who volunteered to be a living donor.

"The Illinois Army National Guard family was a beacon of hope," Wilkerson said. "So many people reached out and offered to help. It was incredibly uplifting

to see that level of support."

Wilkerson said his wife's decision ultimately saved his life. "I've heard many people say they wouldn't have made it through their careers without their spouse," he said. "I may be one of the few who can literally say I wouldn't be here without mine."

But his wife has made one condition to the liver donation clear. "She told me that if we ever get divorced, she's taking her part back," Wilkerson said, drawing laughter from the audience. Justin and Mary have been married 20

years, so chances are good he'll be able to hold on to his piece of Mary – and Mary herself.

Wilkerson's path to military service began in July 1993 when, at age 19, he walked into the Illinois Army National Guard recruiting office for an opportunity to pay for college and build discipline. "I had no idea where my life would go," Wilkerson said of his 1993 enlistment. "I simply wanted to do something productive. I did not realize the profound effect that decision would have on the rest of my life."

He earned his commission in 2000 through the Illinois Army

National Guard Officer Candidate School. Over the course of his career, he served in a variety of leadership and staff positions across the organization.

His assignments included service with Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery; the 644th Personnel Services Battalion; the 633rd Personnel Services Detachment, where he served as commanding officer; and the 33rd Area Support Group. After his command of the 33rd Military Police Battalion, he served with the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, the 65th Troop Command Brigade, and the Construction and Facilities Management Office.

After serving as Deputy Joint Operations Officer of the Illinois National Guard, he concluded his career as the Illinois Army National Guard's G-1 Human Resources Director.

Wilkerson completed operational assignments within U.S. Northern Command areas of responsibility and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2003. In 2005, he deployed as part of Joint Task Force Katrina, providing humanitarian relief following Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast.

Wilkerson credited his parents,



Lt. Col. Justin Wilkerson presents a certificate of appreciation to his wife, Mary Wilkerson, during his retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield, Illinois, March 7, 2026. In 2021, Mary Wilkerson donated a portion of her liver to save his life after he was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wilkerson retired after 32 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard.

particularly his father, a former U.S. Air Force C-130 mechanic, for instilling the values of service and patriotism that guided his career.

His command of the 33rd Military Police Battalion began in 2019 and coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest in 2020, presenting unprecedented challenges for the unit.

"We had Soldiers stationed throughout downtown Chicago," Wilkerson said. "I could not have been prouder of how they performed. They remained professional under pressure and

served the residents of Chicago with calm and discipline."

Now in retirement, Wilkerson plans to spend more time with Mary and their three sons, William, James and Grant. The family resides in Peoria.

Wilkerson expressed gratitude for the Soldiers and leaders he served alongside throughout his time in uniform. "I've had a wonderful career in the Illinois Army National Guard," he said. "I've made lifelong friends and had incredible experiences. I truly feel like the luckiest man who has ever stood on this stage."

Three-Peat!

Woodstock's 'Honeybadgers' Named Illinois Army National Guard's Top Recruiting Company

The Woodstock, Illinois-based Company H "Honeybadgers" of the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion were named the Company of the Year for the third consecutive year at the battalion's annual awards banquet in Springfield on Jan. 31.

The company distinguished itself by enlisting 204 Soldiers in the last fiscal year and fostering a culture of excellence that led to a near sweep of the battalion's major awards. The "Honeybadgers" took home six of the eight top individual awards for the battalion, a testament to their collective success.

The awards included:

- Recruiting and Retention NCO of the Year: Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco
 - First Sergeant of the Year: 1st Sgt. Matthew Serowka
 - Team Leader of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Chad Wille
 - Rookie of the Year: Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos
 - Readiness NCO of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Booher
- First Sgt. Matthew Serowka, the company's senior enlisted leader, attributes the unit's sustained success to its unique culture. "I strictly do culture," Serowka said. "I believe in empowering them

- getting them fully hyped, fully energized."

This family-oriented environment is echoed by the Soldiers in the unit. "It is very family oriented," said last year's "Rookie of the Year" Staff Sgt. Chanc McEstes. "We'll text each other on the side or hang out and play video games together."

This strong sense of team and mutual support is what motivates the "Honeybadgers" to excel. "When everyone has a common goal, individual success is for the team," said Sgt. 1st Class Chad Wille, the "Team Leader of the Year."



The Woodstock-based H Company "Honeybadgers" celebrate their "three-peat" as the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion's "Company of the Year" during the battalion's annual awards banquet, Jan. 31, in Springfield. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Madison Wells, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

He's the Top

Serowka Named ILARNG RRB's First Sergeant of Year

First Sergeant Matthew Serowka, the senior enlisted leader of the Woodstock-based H Company "Honeybadgers," was named the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion's First Sergeant of the Year.

This prestigious award recognizes his outstanding leadership and the exceptional performance of his unit. Under Serowka's guidance, the "Honeybadgers" were named the Recruiting and Retention Battalion's Company of the Year for the third consecutive year, a testament to the culture of excellence he has cultivated. The company enlisted an impressive 204 Soldiers in the last fiscal year

and dominated the battalion's annual awards banquet, securing six of the eight top individual awards.

This impressive list of accolades includes:

- Recruiting and Retention NCO of the Year: Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco
- Team Leader of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Chad Wille
- Rookie of the Year: Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos
- Readiness NCO of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Booher

"I strictly do culture," Serowka said, explaining his leadership philosophy. "I believe in empowering them - getting them fully hyped, fully energized."

This approach has clearly

paid dividends, creating a highly motivated and successful team. Serowka's influence extends beyond just his company; he is also credited with mentoring Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco, the state's top recruiter, from his initial enlistment.

Having won the top honor at the state level, Serowka will now advance to the national competition, where he will compete against the best recruiting first sergeants from across the country for the title of the Army National Guard's top Recruiting First Sergeant. The national competition recognizes the "best of the best" from all 54 states and territories.



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, congratulates 1st Sgt. Matthew Serowka at the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion's annual awards banquet, Jan. 31, in Springfield. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Madison Wells, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

Schaumburg-based Orozco Named Illinois' Top Army National Guard Recruiter for Second Year, Earns National Recognition from NGB

Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco, a recruiter based in Schaumburg, has been named the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) of the Year for the second consecutive year.

The announcement was made at the annual Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion Awards Banquet in Springfield on Jan. 31. In addition to this statewide honor, Orozco was also named to the prestigious National Guard Bureau Director's 54.

The Director's 54 award honors the top Army National Guard recruiter from each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories.

Orozco earned this distinction by enlisting 40 new soldiers in fiscal year 2025.

Orozco's journey to becoming a top recruiter is one of perseverance. In 2016, he was initially disqualified from enlisting due to being overweight and having a neck tattoo. However, with the mentorship of his then-recruiter, Matthew Serowka, Orozco dedicated himself to meeting the standards. Over the course of a year, he lost 60 pounds and underwent laser treatments to remove the tattoo, successfully enlisting in 2017.

Today, 1st Sgt. Serowka is Orozco's company first sergeant in the award-winning H Company "Honeybadgers."



Maj. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco with the Army National Guard Director's 54 Award during the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion's Military Ball and Awards Ceremony on Jan. 31 in Springfield. Orozco was named the Illinois Army National Guard's top recruiter for the second year in a row. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Madison Wells, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

Reflecting on his journey and success, Orozco sees his role as an opportunity to help others transform their lives. "I feel like I'm paying it forward," Orozco said. "The Illinois Army National Guard definitely changed my life,

for the better."

In addition to his top honors, Orozco also received the Master Sergeant Paul McDade Award and the Minuteman Club award during the ceremony.

Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos Named Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting Rookie of the Year

Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos, a recruiter with the Woodstock-based H Company “Honeybadgers,” was named the Illinois Army National Guard’s Recruiting and Retention Battalion “Rookie of the Year” at the battalion’s annual awards banquet in Springfield on Jan. 31.

This prestigious award recognizes the top-performing new recruiter across the state.

Ramos works out of the Schaumburg recruiting office and recruits in Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove, Rolling Meadows, Palatine, and Arlington Heights. Ramos recruited 24 Soldiers into the Illinois Army National Guard in fiscal year 2025.

Ramos’s exceptional performance was a key factor in the “Honeybadgers” remarkable success this year. The company was named the Recruiting and Retention Battalion’s Company of the Year for the third consecutive year, a testament to the dedication and high standards of its Soldiers.

The “Honeybadgers” dominated the awards ceremony, with members of the unit also receiving the following accolades:

- Recruiting and Retention NCO of the Year: Staff Sgt. Francisco Orozco
 - First Sergeant of the Year: 1st Sgt. Matthew Serowka
 - Team Leader of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Chad Wille
 - Readiness NCO of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Booher
- This clean sweep of the major



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, presents Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Ramos with the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion “Rookie of the Year” Award at the battalion’s annual Military Ball and Awards Ceremony, Jan. 31, in Springfield. Ramos recruited 24 new Soldiers into the Army National Guard in fiscal year 2025. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Madison Wells, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion)

awards highlights the exceptional leadership and teamwork within H Company. Staff Sergeant Ramos’s achievement as “Rookie of the Year” in such a high-

performing unit is a significant accomplishment and marks him as a rising star within the Illinois Army National Guard’s recruiting force.

Lake in the Hills Veterans Service Officer Promoted to Chief Warrant Officer Four

Melissa Downey of Lake in the Hills, Ill., was promoted in the Illinois Army National Guard to Chief Warrant Officer 4 on Jan. 11 during a ceremony in Heartland Community College's Astroth Community Education Center auditorium.

Downey, who is assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard headquarters' Logistics Directorate (G4) has more than 32 years of military experience. She enlisted as a senior in high school in 1993 and spent more than 21 years as an enlisted Soldier rising to the rank of sergeant 1st class before becoming a warrant officer in 2015.

Her overseas assignments include First Cook with the 1244th Transportation Co., Operation Iraqi Freedom - Kuwait, from 2003 to 2004 and Deployed Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, Operation Enduring Freedom - Kuwait in 2014. While deployed in 2014, she became the Theater SARC for 3rd Army under Lt. Gen. James Terry.

Downey works for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs as a Veteran Service Officer and part time as a mental health therapist. She lives in Lake in the Hills, Illinois, with her daughter, Leah Hiller, 20; son, Luke Hiller, 16, and dog, Toby.

Illinois Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 4 Melissa Downey is shown with her 20-year-old daughter, Leah Hiller, and 16-year-old son, Luke Hiller, after her promotion, Jan. 11, at Heartland Community College's Astroth Community Education Center auditorium in Normal.



Illinois Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 4 Melissa Downey presented Col. Shawn Nokes, the Illinois Army National Guard's Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, a knife in honor of his ability to "cut through the BS" during her promotion ceremony, Jan. 11, at Heartland Community College's Astroth Community Education Center auditorium in Normal.



Turnbaugh Promoted to Sergeant Major in Illinois Army National Guard

After more than 32 years in the Illinois Army National Guard, Jeremy Turnbaugh, the new Illinois Army National Guard logistics sergeant major, was promoted to sergeant major in a ceremony Jan. 16 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

Turnbaugh enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves in March 1993 as a cannon crew member. After the unit disbanded, he enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard, serving as an ammunition supply specialist.

"I haven't known Sergeant Major Turnbaugh very long, but I always heard how great of a Noncommissioned Officer you are," said Col. Shawn Nokes, Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (G4). "We are excited you are here with us. You bring instant street cred to the G-4. Your legacy and what you've done as an NCO throughout your career makes you that go-to guy."

Nokes thanked Turnbaugh's daughter, Bailey, for her support of his career.

"He loves you and your brother, Trey, very much," he said. "He is a very proud father. Thank you for being here and sharing his time with us."

Nokes congratulated Turnbaugh on his promotion.



Newly promoted Sgt. Maj. Jeremy Turnbaugh's daughter, Bailey, tacks on new rank during a promotion ceremony Jan. 16 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield. Turnbaugh has served in the military for more than 32 years and is the new Illinois Army National Guard's logistics sergeant major.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Nokes said. "You have earned it every step of the way."

Turnbaugh thanked Nokes and the G4 team for making him feel welcome.

"Thank you, Colonel Nokes, and the G4 team," he said. "You made me part of the team right away."

Turnbaugh also thanked his daughter, Bailey, and those with whom he has served.

"This pinning is very special to me," he said. "Thank you to everyone who has invested in me. I wouldn't be here without you. I never thought I would get to this point in my career, so this means a lot to me."

Bryant Promoted to Major in Illinois Army National Guard

Capt. Aaron Bryant was joined by family and friends as he was promoted to the rank of major during a ceremony March 5 at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield.

“Captain Bryant is an exceptional officer,” said Col. Matthew Garrison, Chief of the Illinois National Guard’s Joint Staff. “This promotion is about our trust in his future performance. I see great things coming in his future. I know he’s ready because he’s been solving strategic level problems for us since he was a newly promoted captain.”

Bryant, the operations branch chief of the Illinois National Guard’s Joint Staff, enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1998 as a radio operator assigned to the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. Bryant deployed with the battalion to Iraq in 2003 as a radio operator and machine gunner on many convoy missions.

After a break in military service, Bryant enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 2013 and entered the traditional Officer Candidate School program. He has held numerous roles throughout the Illinois National Guard. He deployed to Jordan in 2020 with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment as the executive officer.

“This promotion is not just a personal achievement, but a reflection of the leadership, mentorship, and camaraderie I’ve been fortunate to experience throughout my career,” Bryant said. “Thank you for your guidance, for pushing me,



Sarah Crafton, the fiancé of newly promoted Maj. Aaron Bryant, tacks on new major rank during a promotion ceremony March 5 at the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield. Bryant is the operations branch chief with the Illinois National Guard Joint Staff.

and for trusting me with the responsibilities that have lead me to this moment.”

Bryant thanked his family for their support.

“Your unwavering support, understanding, and sacrifice on the foundation upon which my career is built,” he said. “Thank you

for being my rock through every challenge. I could not have done this without you guys.

“This promotion has given me a renewed sense of commitment. I am keenly aware of the increased responsibility and trust being placed upon me,” he said. “I will do my best to uphold the values of our service to lead with integrity.”

Bostic Promoted to Chief Master Sergeant

Senior Master Sgt. Nathaniel Bostic was officially promoted to Chief Master Sergeant during a ceremony Dec. 13, 2025, at the 183rd Wing.

A member of the 183rd Communications Squadron, Bostic was recognized in a ceremony presided over by Col. Shawn Strahle, Commander, 183rd Wing. Bostic's family was in attendance and proudly "tacked on" his Chief stripes.

During the ceremony, Bostic was presented the Meritorious Service Medal by Strahle.





Members of Hubbard High School's JROTC saber team perform drill and ceremony as part of Hubbard High School's 47th JROTC Military Ball at Chateau del Mar in Hickory Hills, Ill., on March 6. The saber team earned many awards this school year and qualified for the Army National Drill Competition in Orlando, Fla. where the best schools from all over the country compete.

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd Talks Leadership, Teamwork at Hubbard High School JROTC Military Ball



Maj Gen Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, shares his wisdom with the guests at Hubbard High School's 47th JROTC Military Ball at Chateau del Mar in Hickory Hills, Ill., on March 6. Maj Gen Boyd looked up to and was mentored by Lt. Col. (ret) Alesia Franklin who is the Senior Army Instructor for Hubbard High School's JROTC.



Members of Hubbard High School's JROTC saber team perform drill and ceremony as part of Hubbard High School's 47th JROTC Military Ball at Chateau del Mar in Hickory Hills, Ill., on March 6. The saber team earned many awards this school year and qualified for the Army National Drill Competition in Orlando, Fla. where the best schools from all over the country compete.



Sherlin Rocha, a cadet in Hubbard High School's JROTC, introduces Maj Gen Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard at Hubbard High School's 47th JROTC Military Ball at Chateau del Mar in Hickory Hills, Ill., on March 6.

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

Decorated Conductor and Educator Retires from Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing

After a long and distinguished career of service to both his nation and his community, Lt. Col. Bryan Miller has retired from the Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing after nearly 30 years. A respected leader and accomplished musician, Miller's career is a testament to the dedication of the Citizen-Airman. His retirement ceremony was held at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria on March 7.

Miller served as the Commander and Conductor of the 566th Air Force Band, also known as the Air National Guard Band of the Midwest.

His leadership and musical talents were showcased during numerous stateside and overseas missions. Highlights of his military career include leading missions in Southwest Asia and Africa, performing at the Mount Rushmore Independence Day Celebration, and honoring the Tuskegee Airmen and astronaut Neil Armstrong.

In his civilian life, Lt. Col. Miller has been a dedicated music educator for 35 years, serving for 30 years as the Music Department Chair at Leyden High Schools.

He has also held adjunct faculty positions at Elmhurst University, North Central College, Vander Cook College of Music, and Northern Illinois University.

A talented trumpet player, Miller has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass section and is a founding member of the Pete Ellman Big Band.

His commitment to music education extends to his founding of the Chicagoland Educators Orchestra and his service on the Board of Directors for the Chicago



Illinois Air National Guard Lt. Col. Bryan Miller, commander of the Air National Guard Band of the Midwest, 566th Air Force Band, retires during a ceremony held in Peoria, Illinois, March 7, 2026. Lt. Col. Miller concludes a distinguished career of service, having led the unit in its mission to inspire patriotism and bolster morale through the power of music for audiences around the world. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Master Sgt. Scott Thompson, 182nd Airlift Wing)

Youth Symphony Orchestra, and on the artistic staff for the Naperville Youth Symphony Orchestra.

"Lt. Col. Miller's career exemplifies the best of the Air National Guard," said Col. Rusty L. Ballard, commander of the 182nd Airlift Wing. "His dedication to both his military and civilian careers is an inspiration to us all. He has served with honor and distinction, and we are grateful for his many years of service to the state of Illinois and the nation. We wish him the very best in his well-deserved

retirement."

The 182nd Airlift Wing, based in Peoria, Illinois, is an operational flying unit of the Illinois Air National Guard. The wing's mission is to provide global tactical airlift and airdrop of personnel and equipment, as well as aeromedical evacuation and disaster response, utilizing the C-130 Hercules aircraft.

The wing and its Airmen are consistently engaged in training and real-world missions, both at home and abroad, demonstrating a commitment to readiness and excellence.

34th Division Sustainment Brigade Honors Outgoing Commander, Welcomes New Leader

The 34th Division Sustainment Brigade (DSB) recognized the distinguished leadership of Col. Elizabeth A. Roxworthy of Rochester, Illinois, as she relinquished command to Col. Bradley E. Roach of Bloomington, Illinois, in a formal ceremony on Saturday, March 14, 2026.

The event was presided over by Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, the Assistant Adjutant General - Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard.

“Beth, congratulations on completing a fantastic command,”

said Williams. “Brad, I look forward to many great things from you in the future as well.”

The ceremony marked the culmination of Roxworthy’s successful command, which began in July 2023. Her tenure as commander was a major milestone of a decorated military career that so far has spanned more than three decades. She enlisted in 1993, she rose through the ranks, and earned a direct commission in 2006. Her leadership has been tested and proven in numerous key assignments, including a deployment to Iraq as a Platoon

Leader and to Djibouti as the Executive Officer to the Commanding General of the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa. Roxworthy is a recipient of the Bronze Star Medal, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, and the prestigious General Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award, Roxworthy now serves as the Chief of Staff for the Illinois Department of Military Affairs.

“Being entrusted with the 34th DSB has been one of the greatest honors of my career,” said Roxworthy.

Col. Bradley E. Roach, the incoming commander, previously served as the brigade’s Executive Officer during its most recent deployment supporting Operation Spartan Shield and Operation Inherent Resolve. His extensive career includes deployments to both Iraq



Col. Bradley Roach is joined by his daughter as he addresses the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade during a change of command ceremony where he assumed command of the brigade from Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy March 14 at the Northwest Armory in Chicago. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Brianna Maze, 34th Division Sustainment Brigade)

and Afghanistan and numerous command and staff positions where he solidified his reputation as an expert in complex logistical operations.

“Soldiers of the 34th let us be worthy of the sacrifices made by our families,” said Roach. “Let us be the sustainers of victory. I am proud to be one of you.”

The 34th Division Sustainment Brigade traces its lineage back to 1936. The brigade provides mission-critical logistical and sustainment support including supply, maintenance, transportation, medical and other services essential for operational success, supporting units during activations in Illinois and around the globe.



Outgoing 34th Division Sustainment Brigade commander Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy receives the Brigade’s flag from Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph Cistaro during a change of command ceremony where Roxworthy relinquished command to Col. Bradley Roach March 14 at the Northwest Armory in Chicago. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Richard Blackwood, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)



Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard pose in front of the entrance to the main exhibit hall of the Chicago Auto Show on Feb. 11, 2026. The Illinois National Guard partnered with the USO at the Auto Show so that the public could learn more about the Illinois National Guard and the USO.

ILNG Partners with USO for Chicago Auto Show



Spc. Christian Lis, a Military Police officer with the 933rd Military Police Company, speaks with David Nelson, a plumber with local 130, at the Chicago Auto Show.



Sal Reyes, a local business owner, sits in the driver seat of an M1151A1 at the Chicago Auto Show.



Sgt. Theodore Rogers, left, a recruiter with Company B, Illinois National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, and Sgt. Esteban Acosta, second from left, Company C, 260th Military Intelligence Battalion, are pictured with Maggie Blunk, third from left, and Terry Lemke, USO.



Spc. Daniel Mantel (left) and Spc. Christian Lis (right), military police Soldiers with the 933rd Military Police Company, help set up the Illinois National Guard booth at the Chicago Auto Show in Chicago on Feb. 11.

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



Conrad Buitron stands in the gunners turret of an M1151A1. Buitron is a U.S. Air Force veteran of the Strategic Air Command.



Sgt Luigi Cabantog, a recruiter with Company B, Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion, guides an M1151A1 into place at the Chicago Auto Show.

Linguists Compete at Best Linguist Competition

Five Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers from the Chicago-based Charlie Company, 341st Military Intelligence Battalion (Linguist), participated in the 8th Annual Best Linguist Competition (BLING) and the 37th Annual Language Conference (LANGCON), hosted by the Utah Army National Guard's 300th Military Intelligence Brigade (Linguist) on Feb. 5-6.

The events enhance operational language capability, strengthen intelligence tradecraft, and support mission readiness across the defense language enterprise. The Soldiers, including Sgt. Yuriy Slyvka (Russian), Cpl. Mohanned El Natour (Arabic), Sgt. Ibeeth Garza (Spanish), and Sgt. Kamilath Ali (French) – competed as a team against participants from across the Department of Defense and defense language enterprise in a competition testing linguistic proficiency and operational intelligence skills in a simulated operational environment.

Competitors rotated through scenario-based events



replicating real-world intelligence requirements, including open-source intelligence collection and analysis, document and media exploitation, voice intercept transcription and translation, and intelligence reporting and briefing under time-constrained and

operationally realistic conditions. Cpl. El Natour placed in the top 20 percent of Arabic linguists in the top half of linguists overall. Sgt. Slyvka ranked in the top half of Russian linguists and in the top 40 percent of linguists overall.

Following the competition, the Soldiers attended the 37th Annual Language Conference, which brought together members of the defense language enterprise, academia, and industry to discuss current and emerging challenges facing intelligence linguists. The conference provided training, professional development, and collaboration opportunities focused on sustaining language readiness and supporting operational intelligence requirements.

Illinois Army National Guard participation in BLING and LANGCON reinforces the development of language-enabled intelligence capabilities and supports continued readiness to meet state, federal, and global mission requirements.





Illinois Air National Guard C-130H Hercules, inside of the main hangar during routine maintenance, at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria, Illinois, on March 8, 2026. Routine maintenance supports mission readiness through the Illinois National Guard core competencies of “Man, Equip, Train, Deploy.” (Illinois Air National Guard photos by Senior Airman Noah Hardin, 182nd Airlift Wing)

Greasing the Engines: People Behind Aircraft



Above, Illinois Air National Guard’s Tech. Sgt. Drew Hitt, an aerospace propulsion specialist with the Illinois Air National Guard’s 182nd Maintenance Support Group, performs routine maintenance on engine No. 1 of a C-130H Hercules.

Above right, Illinois Air National Guard’s Tech. Sgt. Brandon Olson, an aerospace propulsion specialist with the Illinois Air National Guard’s 182nd Maintenance Support Group, conducts a visual inspection of components on engine No. 1 of a C-130H Hercules.

Right, Illinois Air National Guard Senior Airman Dirk Tharp, an aerospace propulsion specialist with the Illinois Air National Guard’s 182nd Maintenance Support Group, spins the propeller of a C-130H Hercules while replacing components within the propeller spinner of engine No. 2.



Milan-based Soldier Promoted to Staff Sergeant

Daniela Martinez was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant in the Illinois Army National Guard during a ceremony on Saturday, Feb. 21, in the Milan-based 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment.

The promotion ceremony was a family affair, as Staff Sgt. Martinez had her new rank pinned on by her sisters, Fernanda Figueroa and Claudia Morales.

Also, witnessing the significant milestone in her military career were her mother, Guadalupe Hernandez, and her father, Fernando Martinez.

Claudia Morales pins staff sergeant rank on her sister, Daniela Martinez, Feb. 21. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Chris Garibay, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment)



126th Air Refueling Wing Conducts Yellow Ribbon

U.S. Air Force Col. Nick Henschel, 126th Air Refueling Wing, commander, speaks to deployers and their families before a yellow ribbon event at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, March 9, 2026. Yellow Ribbon programs connect deployers and their families to resources while they are deployed. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Brian Ellison)



217th Engineering Installation Squadron Hones Readiness with Critical Hands-On Training

The 217th Engineering Installation Squadron (EIS) dedicated its March regularly scheduled drill to enhancing its deployment capabilities through vital Increment Monitor Training, at the 183rd Wing, Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport. The training ensures the squadron is ready to answer the nation's call at a moment's notice.

More than 80 members of the 217th EIS participated in the rigorous, hands-on training, which focused on the fundamental skills required to deploy wartime assets. The training was broken down into two critical stations: the precise art of pallet build-up and the meticulous process of weighing and taping vehicles for strategic airlift on military aircraft. These tasks are the bedrock of the U.S. Air Force's global mobility mission.

This training is crucial for the squadron's designated Increment Monitor Points of Contact, who are charged with these exact duties during high-stakes exercises, inspections, and real-world deployment operations. Their proficiency ensures that the squadron's Unit Type Code (UTC) assets can be generated and employed swiftly and safely.

"What the 217th has accomplished here is a perfect example of our Wing's commitment to being 'Always Ready, Always There,'" said Col. Shawn Strahle, Commander of the 183rd Wing. "This isn't just about checking a box; it's about building the muscle memory and technical expertise that guarantees our ability to project power and support joint force operations anywhere in the world. Every pallet built and every vehicle



Senior Master Sgt. Scott Reynolds and Master Sgt. Mike Morrow inspect 217 Engineering Installation Squadron members on Pallet Build-up Training.

weighed is a direct contribution to the lethality and readiness of the United States Air Force and the Department of War."

To ensure the training met the highest standards, subject matter experts from the Wing Inspection Team (WIT), Senior Master Sgt. Scott Reynolds and Master Sgt. Mike Morrow, were on hand to provide real-time inspections and feedback at each station.

The timing of this event is pivotal, as the 217th EIS and the entire 183d Wing are preparing for a Foundational Readiness Inspection (FRI) by the Air Combat Command Inspector General Team in September 2026. This training provides a critical benchmark for the squadron's readiness.

Chief Master Sgt. Aaron Johnston, the Senior Enlisted Leader for the 217th EIS, praised the dedication of the squadron's Airmen. "Our Noncommissioned

Officers and Airmen are the heart of this mission. What I see out here is a team mastering complex and physically demanding tasks, but more importantly, I see their deep commitment to one another in reaching our mission goals," Johnston said. "This speaks volumes about their professionalism and dedication. This training ensures that when the time comes, they have the confidence and capability to execute flawlessly under pressure. It's this level of dedication within the Air National Guard that provides such a vital, experienced force for our nation's defense."

By successfully completing this training, the 217th EIS has not only sharpened its own operational capabilities but has also reinforced the 183rd Wing's reputation as a ready and reliable force, prepared to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Returning Competitors Rise to the Top at 404th MEB Best Warrior Competition

*Story and Photos by
Spc. Charlie Michaels
404th MEB Public Affairs*

Eight Soldiers from the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade competed in the brigade's Best Warrior Competition at Marseilles Training Center in Marseilles, Illinois, March 13-15, 2026.

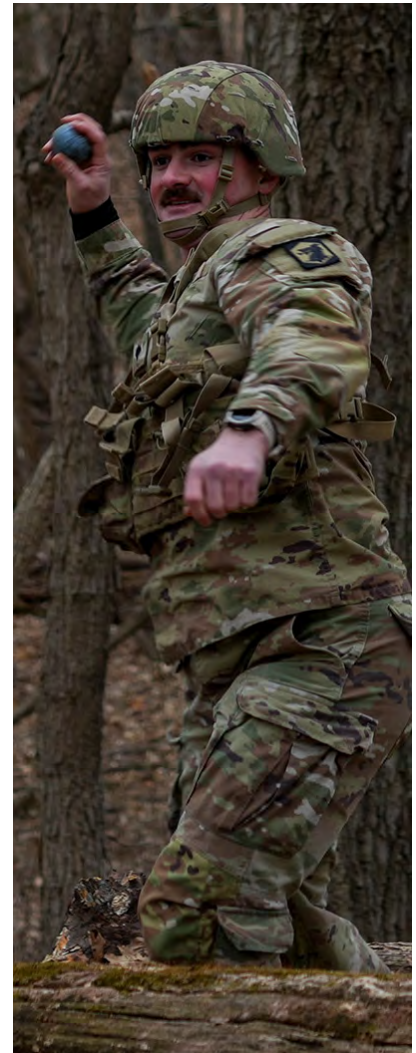
The 123rd Engineer Battalion produced both winners in this year's competition. Staff Sgt. Brett Winegarner of the 2118th Asphalt Detachment was named "NCO of the Year" and Spc. Timothy Chowles of the 616th Engineer Utilities Detachment was named "Soldier of the Year."

Both will now compete in the Illinois Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition, March 26-29, also at Marseilles Training Center. There, they will compete against the winning Soldiers from the other Illinois Army National



Guard brigades as well as Polish Soldiers, representing the Illinois National Guard's State Partnership Program with the Polish military.

Competitors came from across the brigade, representing each battalion as well as brigade-level



companies.

Representing the 44th Chemical Battalion, Sgt. Nathaniel Spears of the 444th Chemical Company and Spc. Jason Malson of the 445th Chemical Company competed alongside 33rd Military Police Battalion representatives Sgt. Lola Falbo of the 933rd Military Police Company and Pvt. Dominic Boorman of the 33rd MP BN Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment. Brigade-level units were represented by Spc. Jordan Urbanick of the 404th MEB Headquarters Support Company and Spc. Colton Sedlock of the 406th Brigade Signal Company.

Over three days, Soldiers competed in eight events designed to test their physical fitness, technical skills, and military knowledge. Events included a confidence course, a mystery scavenger hunt, drill and ceremony, the Army Fitness Test, an Army Warrior Task round robin, land navigation, an appearance board, and a timed 12-mile ruck march across the installation.

Chowles expressed his admiration for the medical lanes



of the AWT round robin. The round robin tested Soldiers on core military tasks, including radio communication, combat lifesaving, Claymore and grenade deployment, and donning chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear protective gear.

"Medicine is one of the strongest suits that you could bring anywhere," Chowles said. "I'm an engineer, but I give huge kudos to those who are out there saving lives."

Chowles, who placed second in last year's "Best Soldier" competition, returned this year for another chance at the title. He noted that past winners had also competed in multiple years, motivating him to return and improve. Chowles saw this year's competition as an opportunity for redemption and began preparing early, especially for the ruck march.

"I had been practicing with my mini ruck, in full OCP, through all sorts of weather," Chowles said. "The months leading up to the competition were extremely cold, so I knew if I could hit my times in 15- or 20-degree weather, I would be able to hit them in 40-degree weather."

Chowles was not the only returnee. Winegarner secured his third win at the brigade-level competition. Winegarner had previously won in the "Best Soldier" category as a specialist and in the "Best NCO" category as a sergeant.

"It's an experience I really enjoy," Winegarner said. "I really get something out of it every year."

This year, Winegarner's win did not come easily. He

struggled with illness throughout the competition. Despite this, he persevered.

"I could have used it as an excuse to quit anytime," Winegarner said. "I promised my Sergeant Major, I promised my leadership, and I promised myself that I was going to give this everything I can, and I do my best to remain a man of my word."

Although both winners had competed previously, this year's

competition represented a new beginning for the brigade. This was the first BWC under the helm of Command Sgt. Maj. Sarah Roman, the Command Sergeant Major of the 404th MEB.

"There's a lot of foundation that has already been laid," Roman said. "I came in under the impression that the reputation of the 404th kind of preceded itself, so for me, it's about stepping in and making sure [the competition]



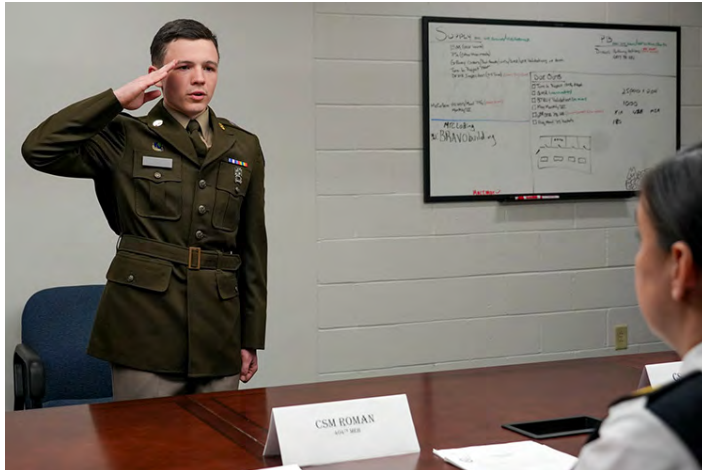
continues to improve year after year.”

Roman emphasized the competition’s importance in challenging not only the Soldiers of the 404th MEB but also all participating National Guardsmen.

“Always ready, always there,” said Roman. “This competition challenges them to say, ‘I can still turn around and be a Soldier on a moment’s notice.’”

Looking ahead to the state-level competition, Roman voiced confidence in the brigade’s representatives.

“I think they’re going to do extremely well,” said Roman. “I think there are a lot of lessons learned coming from brigade. We made it challenging on purpose so that they’d be ready.”



Air Forces Southern Selects Dolan Enlisted Individual Mobilization Augmentee of Year

*Story by
Staff Sgt. Alexandria King
183rd Wing
Illinois Air National Guard*

The 183rd Wing is proud to recognize Master Sgt. Matthew Dolan, Air Mobility Control Team Superintendent, Air Mobility Operations Squadron (AMOS), Illinois Air National Guard, for being awarded the Enlisted Individual Mobilization Augmentee of the year for Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH).

In June 2024, Dolan transferred to the 183rd Wing in Springfield, Illinois. Since then, he has enhanced operational capabilities by deploying as the first-ever U.S. Air Force enlisted Airlift Execution Officer in support of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility.

When asked how it feels to receive this award, Dolan said, "It's wonderful, but it highlights the fact that the 183rd Air Operations Group (183 AOG) can do the mission. We were tasked very short notice...two weeks we were out there, boots on the ground, executing that mission and creating great effect."

Always ready, always there. This phrase serves as the motto of the National Guard and exemplifies the impact the 183rd has on current military operations.

Equipped with expertise in both civilian and military skill sets, Guardsmen bring forth a unique, multi-capable element to all missions, even when tasked in a short time frame. Dolan and the 183rd AOG were quick to respond and utilize their subject matter expertise and planning proficiency to accomplish the mission.

"We're problem solvers, right?"



Master Sgt. Matthew Dolan, Air Mobility Control Team Superintendent, Air Mobility Operations Squadron (AMOS), Illinois Air National Guard, was awarded the Enlisted Individual Mobilization Augmentee of the year for Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH).

Put anyone from the 183rd in front of a problem and we'll solve it. That's 90% of our job, and we do it well." said Dolan.

By employing his skills and expertise toward the mission, Dolan was also able to coordinate and network with 24 different agencies within a joint force environment, showcasing the Air

National Guard's integration and support capabilities.

Dolan's accomplishment in receiving the Enlisted IMA of the year for AFSOUTH award not only reflects the impact the Air National Guard has on Total Force real-world operations, but also demonstrates the strength of joint, military collaboration.

Illinois Army National Guard Combatives Instructor Retires After 23 Years of Service

*Story and Photos by
2nd Lt. Trenton Fouché
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs*

The Illinois Army National Guard honored Staff Sgt. Christopher P. Kelnhofer, a longtime Modern Army Combatives Program instructor, during a retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy Feb. 22 on Camp Lincoln. The ceremony recognized 23 years of service.

The ceremony was hosted by Lt. Col. Casey Steiner, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 129th Regimental Training Institute (RTI), and brought together family members, fellow Soldiers, and leaders to celebrate Kelnhofer's career and impact.

Kelnhofer enlisted on Sept. 11, 2002 — one year after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — as an M1A1 Abrams Armor Crewman. He completed basic training and 19K Advanced Individual Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. He served on active duty until July 1, 2006, when he transitioned to the Illinois Army



Lt. Col. Casey Steiner presents Staff Sgt. Christopher P. Kelnhofer with his Certificate of Retirement during a ceremony at the 129th Regimental Training Institute in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 22, 2026. Kelnhofer retired after 23 years of service in the United States Army and Illinois Army National Guard.

National Guard as a 19D Cavalry Scout.

During his career, Kelnhofer deployed to Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Since 2015, Kelnhofer has been a key leader within the Illinois Army National Guard's Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP), serving as both a competitor and instructor. Drawing on his experience as a civilian wrestling coach, he helped elevate combatives training standards and mentored

Soldiers from Illinois and across the United States, including students from Puerto Rico.

In his remarks, Steiner emphasized the significance of Kelnhofer's enlistment date.

"That means a younger version of this Soldier said, 'My country just got attacked, and I'm going to do something about it,'" Steiner said. "He signed up knowing he could be going right into the fight. That matters."

"I thank my family for all the support they've given me," Kelnhofer said. "I was given a great opportunity to be part of the RTI. We trained students from all over the United States. I got paid to do what I love."



Staff Sgt. Christopher P. Kelnhofer delivers remarks during his retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 22.

Bloomington Soldier Credits Success to Giant Life Lessons

The Commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade credited the success in his military career to giants who offered him life lessons.

Newly-promoted Col. Bradley Roach of Bloomington, the Commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade, was honored in a ceremony March 20 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln in Springfield, becoming the 19th colonel in the Illinois Army National Guard.

“For 32 plus years, I’ve been surrounded by giants,” Roach said. “Small giants, big giants, tough-love giants, and kindhearted giants. Each one left a mark on my soul. I appreciate every single one of you.”

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard said getting promoted to colonel is very difficult to do.

“Brad, I’ve known you a long time,” said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. “We’ve had many conversations. I told you that you were doing all the right things, and your time is going to come. Your time is today and right now. I know you’re ready for it. I know you’re ready for command. Our future is in your hands.”

Roach enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1993 as an ammunition handler assigned to Service Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment. He rose through the ranks to sergeant before being commissioned as a second lieutenant in the field artillery branch in 2003, later branching into the transportation branch.

He has deployed three times for overseas missions. During



Rachal and Rosalyn Roach, the family of newly promoted Col. Bradley Roach, secure new rank on his uniform during a promotion ceremony March 20 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Roach, of Bloomington, is the new Commander of the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)

Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004-2006, Roach served as a platoon leader, conducting convoy security, reconnaissance, and personnel security missions. During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2011, Roach served as the U.S. Battle Captain for a combined U.S. and Polish brigade-size task force of 4,000 Soldiers, coordinating assets for full-spectrum combat operations in the Ghanzi Province. He also served as the Executive

Officer of the 34th DSB during its deployment in support of Operation Spartan Shield and Operation Inherent Resolve.

Williams thanked Roach’s family, including wife Rachal, and 7-year-old daughter, Rosalyn, for their support of Roach’s career.

“He can’t do these jobs without the support of the family,” Williams said. “A lot of responsibility comes with this rank. He’s a fantastic officer but he can’t do it without the support

structure your family offers.”

Roach talked about some of the great giants who left a positive mark on his soul.

“Corporal Mark Kellogg, a Cavalry Scout who joined the Illinois National Guard after his Reserve unit disbanded, taught me to embrace the suck,” he said. “When I was complaining about being cold, wet, and miserable during a field exercise, he told me I had two choices. I could either get out or learn to love it. If you get out, you’ll regret your decision down the road. If you learn to love it, you’ll never regret it. I learned to love it. My body regrets it, but

my heart doesn’t.”

Roach described his late father as a tough-love giant.

“He was the greatest giant I have ever known,” Roach said. “He may be gone, but his life lessons are etched into who I am. He taught me about hard work, resilience, and teamwork. In the Army, when one of us loses, we all lose, but when one of us succeeds we all win.”

Roach described his wife, Rachal, through a message he read when deployed to Kuwait. The message described the trouble God experienced in designing the perfect military wife.

Roach said his littlest giant, his daughter Rosalyn, recharges his soul.

“She told me after my last deployment she doesn’t like me taking long trips,” he said. “But she likes the Army because of its ceremonies.”

Roach said each of the moments he described are just a few which shaped him as a Soldier, person, and father.

“These lessons are as true today as they were then,” he said. “Find a positive giant in your life. Learn from them and then strive to become one for someone else someday.”



Blankenship Retires After 40 Years of Service

Chief Master Sgt. David Blankenship Jr., superintendent of the 126th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, retired after 40 years of distinguished military service in January. Blankenship began his military journey on active duty in 1987. In 1991, he transitioned to the Illinois Air National Guard. As part of the move from O’Hare International Airport to Scott Air Force Base, he continued his career with the 126th Air Refueling Wing. Under Blankenship’s leadership, the Wing consistently maintained the highest mission-capable rate of any tanker fleet over the past 10 years, and remains today. He was presented with the Meritorious Service Medal.



Remembering Our Fallen



1st Lt. Jared Southworth

2009: 1st Lt. Jared W. Southworth, 26, of Oakland, Illinois, died Feb. 8 in Helmand, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered from an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, headquartered in Marion, Illinois.



Sgt. Jessica Housby

2005: Sgt. Jessica M. Housby, 23, of Rock Island, Illinois, died Feb. 9 in Route Golden, Iraq, of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near her convoy. Housby was assigned to the 1644th Transportation Company, based in Rock Falls, Illinois.



Sgt. Scott Stream

2009: Sgt. Scott B. Stream, 39, of Mattoon, Illinois, died Feb. 24, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, based in Effingham, Illinois.



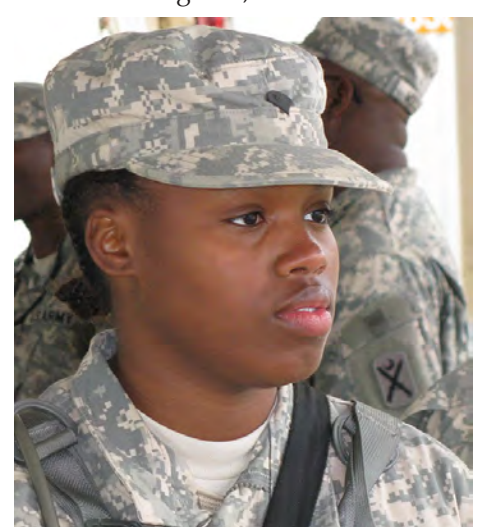
Staff Sgt. Jason Burkholder

2009: Staff Sgt. Jason E. Burkholder, 27, of Champaign, Illinois, died Feb. 8 in Helmand, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered from an improvised explosive device. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, headquartered in Marion, Illinois.



Sgt. Schuyler Patch

2009: Sgt. Schuyler B. Patch, 25, of Galva Illinois, died Feb. 24, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle. He was assigned to 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment, based in Kewanee, Illinois.



Sgt. Simone Robinson

2009: Sgt. Simone A. Robinson, 21, of Dixmoor, Illinois, died March 1 at Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio, Texas, of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near her security post on Jan. 17 in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was assigned to the 634th BSB, based in Crestwood, Illinois.

Remembering Our Fallen



Sgt. Robert Weinger

2009: Sgt. Robert M. Weinger, 24, of Round Lake Beach, Illinois, died March 15 a result of wounds sustained in Kot, Afghanistan, when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle. Weinger was transported to Jalabad, Afghanistan, where he later died. He was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, Woodstock.



Sgt. Christopher Abeyta

2009: Sgt. Christopher P. Abeyta, 23, of Midlothian, Illinois, died March 15 a result of wounds sustained in Kot, Afghanistan, when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle. Abeyta was transported to Jalabad, Afghanistan, where he later died. He was assigned to 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, Woodstock.



Staff Sgt. Ivory Phipps

2004: Staff Sgt. Ivory L. Phipps, 44, of Chicago, died March 17, in Baghdad, Iraq, of wounds sustained from a mortar attack. Phipps was assigned to the 1544th Transportation Company, based in Paris.



Spc. Norman Cain III

2009: Spc. Norman L. Cain III, 22, of Mt. Morris, Illinois, died March 15 a result of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle in Kot, Afghanistan. He was assigned to 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, Woodstock.



Staff Sgt. Jacob Frazier

2003: Illinois Air National Guard Staff Sergeant Jacob L. Frazier, 24, of St. Charles, Ill. assigned to the 169th Air Support Operations Squadron (182d Airlift Wing) in Peoria, Illinois. He was killed by suspected former Taliban during an ambush on his reconnaissance convoy at Geresk, in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. He was part of a special operations team that was inspecting a school and hospital being built with American funding.

Illinois Air National Guard Announces 2026 Outstanding Airmen of Year



U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Josephine Lange, an Airman at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, poses for a photo with Illinois Air National Guard leadership after winning the airman category of the state Outstanding Airman of the Year (OAY) ceremony at Camp Lincoln, Illinois, Jan. 9, 2026. Wing OAY winners from the 183rd Wing, 182nd Airlift Wing and 126th Air Refueling Wing competed at the state level, with state winners advancing to the regional level of competition. (U.S. Air National Guard photos by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Savana DelRose, a noncommissioned officer (NCO) at the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, poses for a photo with Illinois Air National Guard leadership after winning the NCO category of the state Outstanding Airman of the Year (OAY) ceremony at Camp Lincoln, Illinois, Jan. 9, 2026.



U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Matthew Luebeck, a senior noncommissioned officer (SNCO) at the 126th Air Refueling Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, poses for a photo with Illinois Air National Guard leadership after winning the SNCO category of the state Outstanding Airman of the Year (OAY) ceremony at Camp Lincoln, Illinois, Jan. 9, 2026.

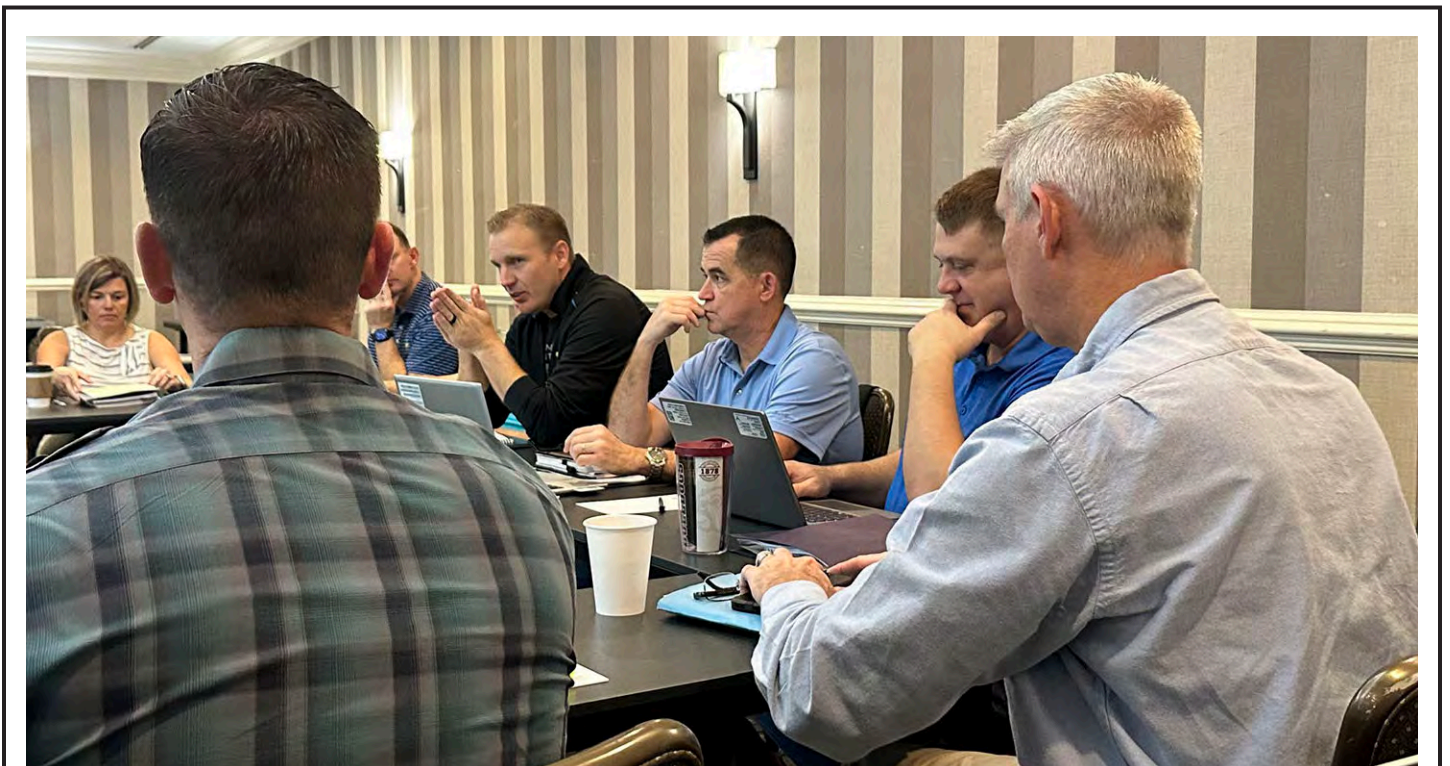


U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Patrick Moreth, a first sergeant at the 183rd Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, poses for a photo with Illinois Air National Guard leadership after winning the first sergeant category of the state Outstanding Airman of the Year (OAY) ceremony at Camp Lincoln, Illinois, Jan. 9, 2026.



126th Air Refueling Wing Wins MEEP Award for Second Consecutive Year

For the second consecutive year, the 126th Air Refueling Wing has won first place in the Mission Execution Excellence Program, for fuel efficiency, Air Reserve Component category. Col. Matt Kopp, center, Deputy Commander of the 126th Air Refueling Wing accepted the award on behalf of the unit. U.S. Air Force leaders assigned to the 126th Air Refueling Wing and 375th Air Mobility Wing were awarded \$350,000 by the Mission Execution Excellence Program (MEEP) at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, Jan. 8. The MEEP competition provides monetary awards to units that execute the mission most efficiently throughout the year. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Helen Ly)



126th Air Refueling Wing Commanders, Senior Enlisted Leaders Plan for Future at Offsite Event

The 126th Air Refueling Wing Commanders and Senior Enlisted Leaders came together for a two-day Strategic Offsite in Jacksonville, Florida, in December, to align priorities and plan for the future. During the event, Wing leadership finalized the Tactical Objectives for 2026, setting a clear path forward to strengthen readiness, support Airmen, and accomplish the mission.



126th OSS Hosts Cross-Functional Day

The 126th Operations Support Squadron, Intelligence shop, had a cross-functional day with members of the 618th Air Operations Center/ Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Division, and AMC/A2. They spent the day sharing each others intel missions then AMC and the AOC got to explore the jet they support, the KC-135 at the 126th ARW.

This meets the 126th OSS/Intel Shop's 1st quarter strategic objective, Execute the Mission, 2.3.2, to train with intel personnel across the base.



Soldier Credits Gold Star Scholarships for Path to Success

For Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jacob Harris, a two-time Gold Star Mission scholarship recipient and a member of the Illinois State Police, becoming involved in the organization put him on a path to success.

“During my very first ride, I found myself riding side by side with then Gold Star Mission President David Helfrich,” Harris said at the 9th annual Gold Star Mission Scholarship Banquet in Springfield March 21. “He spent miles telling me about the Illinois National Guard, specifically our Army Engineers. Not long after that ride, I enlisted in the Illinois National Guard as a combat engineer.”

Since enlisting in 2019, Harris completed his degree, and in 2024 was commissioned as an Engineer officer after graduating from the Illinois Army National Guard’s Officer Candidate School. He recently returned home after deploying to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

“The moment I heard about the Gold Star Mission, I knew I wanted to be involved,” Harris said. “The ride is incredible and impactful. The miles aren’t just miles. They are conversations, stories, moments of healing, and connections that would not happen anywhere else.”

Harris thanked the Gold Star families involved with the Gold Star Mission.

“Your presence means more than you know,” Harris said. “Through your involvement, we gain a deeper understanding of your loved one. Who they were, what they stood for, and the legacies they left behind. Your courage and your willingness to share your stories enrich every one of us.”

In 2018, Harris was awarded a scholarship in memory of fallen



Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jacob Harris encourages Gold Star Mission scholarship recipients to learn the story about the name on their scholarship during the Gold Star Mission Scholarship banquet in Springfield March 21. Harris is a two-time scholarship recipient, who enlisted in the Illinois National Guard in 2019, graduated from the Illinois State Police Academy in 2023 and was commissioned as an Army Engineer officer after graduating from the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School in 2024. Most recently, he returned from an overseas deployment to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jared Southworth, of Oakland, Illinois, who died Feb. 8, 2009 in Helmand, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered from an improvised explosive device. Southworth was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, headquartered in Marion.

In 2019, Harris received a scholarship in memory of U.S. Army Pfc. Adam Thomas, Palos Hills, Illinois, who died Aug. 31, 2003, in Afghanistan. Thomas was assigned to 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, New York.

“Every day I put on the uniform as a Soldier in the U.S. Army, I carry with me the legacies of both of those Soldiers,” he said. “I can

say I have worn the ranks both of these men wore during their service.”

Harris encouraged each of the scholarship recipients to learn the story behind the name of their scholarship.

“You have been entrusted with something meaningful, something rooted in service,” Harris said. “Learn their story, carry it with you and let it shape your way forward.”

Harris said watching events unfold in the same places he served has given him a deeper appreciation of what ‘we have at home.’

“I’m thankful to be home, that we have an opportunity to serve, and thankful to be an American,”



Noah Helfrich, second from left, is presented a Gold Star Mission scholarship in memory of Sgt. Franklin Bennett during the Gold Star Mission scholarship banquet in Springfield March 21. Also pictured are, from left, Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jacob Harris, keynote speaker at the scholarship banquet, Barry Tobias, President of the Gold Star Mission, and Susan Weikert, the Gold Star mother of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Weikert, who was killed in action July 17, 2010 in Afghanistan. Helfrich enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard July 2 as a Horizontal Construction Engineer in the Sparta, Illinois-based 631st Engineer Company.

he said. “The simplest most meaningful way to honor the fallen is living with more gratitude.”

Harris also encouraged the scholarship recipients to get involved with the Gold Star Mission.

“We need you. As long as the Gold Star Mission exists, our service members will never die,” he said. “May this scholarship and this banquet be the beginning of your journey with Gold Star Mission.”

Forty \$1,000 scholarships were awarded to recipients in 2026, bringing the total number of scholarships awarded to 357, according to Gold Star Mission President Barry Tobias.

“The scholarships are a living tribute of a life shaped by a hero’s legacy,” Tobias said.

Tobias also thanked the Gold Star families.

“We see you and we honor you,” he said. “Thank you for



Donald Siltman, left, is presented the Command Sgt. Maj. Michael A. Nuding award during the Gold Star Mission scholarship banquet in Springfield March 21. Siltman was honored for his volunteer services during 2025. Also pictured Barry Tobias, President of the Gold Star Mission, and Bill Woollen, representing the Nuding family.



Tommy Roberts, second from left, is presented the Gold Star Mission scholarship in memory of Illinois Army National Guard Spc. Charles Lamb, of Casey, Illinois, during the 9th annual Gold Star Mission scholarship banquet in Springfield March 21. Lamb, who died Sept. 5, 2004, of wounds sustained during a mortar attack in Baghdad, Iraq, was assigned to the 1544th Transportation Company, based in Paris, Illinois. Also pictured from left, Illinois Army National Guard 1st Lt. Jacob Harris, a two-time Gold Star Mission scholarship recipient and the keynote speaker at the banquet, Shelly Lamb, Gold Star mother of Lamb, Barry Tobias, President of the Gold Star Mission, Susan Weikert, the Gold Star mother of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Weikert.

trusting your stories with the Gold Star Mission.”

In addition to the presentation of scholarships, the Gold Star Mission also honored it’s Volunteer of the Year with the Command Sgt. Maj. Michael A. Nuding Award. This year’s recipient was Donald Siltman. Siltman retired from the Illinois Army National Guard in 2022 after nearly 40 years of military service.



Barry Tobias, President of the Gold Star Mission, discusses the achievements of the organization during its nine years of service at the 9th annual Gold Star Mission Scholarship Banquet March 21 in Springfield. In nine years, Gold Star Mission has awarded 357 scholarships, and produced 14 fallen hero videos.

Cavalry Officer Highlights Polish-American Military Bonds During Pulaski Day Event

In a celebration of shared history and enduring partnership, Illinois Army National Guard Col. Michael Kowalski, the Commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, addressed students at the Polish Museum of America on Sunday, March 8, highlighting the legacy of General Casimir Pulaski and the critical role of the modern Cavalry. The event was a cornerstone of the State of Illinois' official Pulaski Day celebrations.

Kowalski spoke of General Pulaski's pivotal role in the American Revolution, where the Polish-born hero is hailed as the "father of the U.S. Cavalry."

Pulaski, a veteran of Poland's own fight for independence, came to America at the encouragement of Benjamin Franklin, who recognized his military prowess. He distinguished himself in battle, most notably at the Battle of Brandywine, where he saved the life of General George Washington. In 1778, Pulaski was appointed as a Brigadier General and given command of the American Cavalry, which he expertly trained and equipped, often with his own funds.

The enduring bond between Polish and American forces, initiated by figures like Pulaski, continues to this day.

Kowalski emphasized the Illinois National Guard's State Partnership Program with Poland, a collaboration that began in 1993 and is considered a model for such partnerships. This program has fostered deep connections through joint training exercises and co-deployments.

Illinois Army National Guard troops co-deployed alongside their Polish allies for 17 consecutive years, starting in Iraq in 2003 and then to Afghanistan. It was during one such co-deployment that a powerful example of this modern-day brotherhood unfolded.

A poignant example of this



Col. Michael Kowalski, Commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Illinois Army National Guard, speaks about Casimir Pulaski at the Polish Museum of America in Chicago on March 8. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

modern-day brotherhood is the story of active Army Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis, a Soldier with the 10th Mountain Division, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions in Afghanistan in 2013. On Aug. 28, 2013, insurgents launched a complex attack on Forward Operating Base Ghazni, beginning with a car bomb that breached the perimeter, followed by 10 insurgents in suicide vests.

Amid the assault of mortars, rockets, and gunfire, Staff Sgt. Ollis, after ensuring his own soldiers' safety, ran toward the danger. He linked up with a Polish officer, Lt. Karol Cierpica, to engage the attackers. When an insurgent cornered them, Ollis, with complete disregard for his own safety, positioned himself between the attacker and the wounded Polish officer. Ollis was mortally wounded when the insurgent's suicide vest detonated, shielding Lt. Cierpica

and saving his life.

Cierpica, who was present at the Medal of Honor ceremony, and the Ollis family have since forged a close bond, a testament to the profound personal relationships that underpin the military alliance.

Chicago, home to one of the largest Polish populations outside of Poland, serves as a fitting backdrop for these celebrations.

The city's rich Polish heritage is evident in its many cultural institutions, such as the Polish Museum of America, and vibrant community events. The annual Pulaski Day events honor the contributions of Polish Americans to Illinois and the nation.

Kowalski's address served as a powerful reminder of the deep historical and ongoing military cooperation between the United States and Poland, a partnership forged in the fight for freedom and strengthened through generations of shared sacrifice and mutual respect.

183rd Security Forces Airmen Participate in Air National Guard Cold Weathers Operation Course

Two members of the 183rd Security Forces Squadron, Senior Airman Malachi Edgington and Airman 1st Class Griffin King, joined more than 65 Air National Guard security forces members at Camp Ripley Training Center, Minnesota, from Jan. 18 through Feb. 2, to train and conduct mission essential tasks in extremely cold temperatures, during the Air National Guard Cold Weather Operations Course (CWOC).

The Cadre and class were comprised of security forces members from across the country as well as members of the Canadian Army's 3rd Canadian Division of the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment, 38th Brigade Group.

This course prepares security forces Airmen to operate, patrol, and sustain mission readiness in extreme cold weather environments. The course supports the Air Force's growing emphasis on Arctic and sub Arctic operational capability. Students learn the following:

- Cold weather survival skills, including shelter building and risk mitigation for cold related injuries
- Movement techniques on snow and ice using snowshoes, sleds, and 70lb rucksacks
- Fieldcraft and sustainment, including weapons and equipment maintenance in sub-zero conditions
- Security and defensive

operations in low visibility, winter terrain

- Land navigation using map, compass, and GPS in snow covered environments

how to maneuver and work as a team, and how to survive in Arctic Temperatures with whatever you can fit in a ruck. Not only did it make me a tougher defender,

but it facilitated new relationships that will last much longer than the course."

King learned valuable lessons as well.

"CWOC gave me an experience that I never thought I'd get the chance to do. After living outdoors in temperatures well below zero, I learned a lot about the cold and myself. I'd say my biggest take away is when you think you're prepared, do more," King said. "I learned this during a thermal shelter night where my fire was my only source of heat. My teammate and I had collected what seemed to be plenty of wood would soon become not enough. I'll remember waking up shaking because our fire had burned out and kicking myself for not getting more wood. I realized after the fact that it's not just wood, it's everything. Right when you think you've planned something out enough, check over it again. When you think

you've planned something and you have all your gear, check it again. Right when I thought I had enough firewood, I didn't check and I called it a night. I realized the importance of just how much taking a little extra time to be thorough can pay dividends."



Senior Airman Malachi Edgington and Airman 1st Class Griffin King, 183rd Security Forces Squadron participated in the Air National Guard's Cold Weather Operations Course at Camp Ripley, Minnesota.

"The Cold Weather Operations Course taught me how to be a tougher defender overall. The traits that are instilled in you throughout the course can be carried out in any type of environment, not just cold," Edgington said. "I learned how to persevere through difficult times,



Stephanie Hires, wife of newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4 Craig Hires, places his new rank on his uniform and son, Pvt. Bryce Hires, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, secures the rank during a promotion ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy Jan. 22.

FIRO Promoted to Chief Warrant Officer Four

Newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4 Craig Hires, of Litchfield, the Illinois Army National Guard Force Integration Readiness Officer, was promoted to his new rank during a ceremony Jan. 22 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

Hires enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in November 1998 and served as the supply clerk for Company C, 2nd Battalion, 130th

Infantry Regiment.

He deployed to Germany in support of Operation Enduring Freedom as part of Task Force Santa Fe.

In 2003, he joined the Active Guard and Reserve program, serving as Company C's training noncommissioned officer from 2003-2007.

In 2016, Hires completed Warrant Officer Candidate School and the

Quartermaster Property Officer branch qualification.

He again deployed in 2018 with the 108th Sustainment Brigade to Iraq in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Upon returning from deployment, Hires served as the property book officer for the 65th Troop Command Brigade until 2023 when he became the Force Integration Readiness Officer.

Daily Promoted to Chief Warrant Officer Four

The Illinois Army National Guard promoted Chief Warrant Officer Trevor Daily to chief warrant officer four during a ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy, Jan. 8.

A Springfield native, Daily serves as the deputy G-2 for the Illinois Army National Guard and the all-source intelligence technician for the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

His promotion recognizes more than 25 years of dedicated military service and leadership.



Megan Daily, wife of newly promoted Chief Warrant Officer 4 Trevor Daily, pins new rank on his uniform during a promotion ceremony Jan. 8 at the Illinois Military Academy.



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Patrick Kerr, public affairs superintendent at the Illinois Air National Guard's 183rd Wing, Springfield, Michigan, prepares to capture images during Northern Strike 26-1 Jan. 29, 2026, at Camp Grayling, Michigan. Northern Strike 26-1 is a Joint National Training Capability accredited, Army-sponsored, National Guard Bureau program. The exercise is tailorable, scalable, and cost-effective for readiness. Participants face cold-weather conditions while training to meet the objectives of the Department of War's Arctic strategy. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)

Cold-Weather Capable

Illinois Air National Guard Public Affairs Airmen Test Limits During Northern Strike at Camp Grayling

**Story by
Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus
183rd Wing Public Affairs**

Public Affairs Airmen from the Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria and 183rd Wing in Springfield, trained in Arctic conditions to prepare for cold-weather operations and assess how effectively they and their equipment function in austere

environments during Northern Strike 26-1 Jan. 26-29, 2026, at Camp Grayling, Michigan.

The training emphasized realism and repetition, placing Airmen in conditions similar to those they may face during real-world missions in Arctic conditions.

"Training outside your comfort zone is imperative for our Airmen. Pushing them physically in a

harsh winter climate, staying fluid with weather that changes by the minute and testing not only them, but their equipment is essential," said U.S. Air Force Maj. Stephen Unverzagt, the Public Affairs officer at the 183d Wing and officer in charge of the Illinois Air National Guard NS 26-1 public affairs team.

Operating in extreme cold introduces consistent, predictable



Tech. Sgt. Wynndermere Shaw, a public affairs specialist with the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, takes a photo of a UH-60 during Northern Strike 26-1 Jan. 28, 2026, at Camp Grayling, Michigan. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)

challenges. Batteries lose power more quickly, camera controls become less responsive and snow effects lenses and screens. The public affairs specialists had to remain flexible in planning assignments and managing resources to protect themselves and their equipment while providing real-world public affairs coverage of the exercise for the Michigan Joint Force Headquarters Public Affairs Office.

Airmen's trust in the personal protective equipment and cold-weather gear was tested alongside camera equipment. The public affairs specialists utilized layering systems that allowed them to stay warm while still being able to operate cameras and other equipment.

Movement and setup were also part of the training. Snow and ice slow travel and increase fatigue, particularly when hauling equipment. The team had to practice moving deliberately,

securing gear to prevent damage and stabilizing cameras and tripods in wind and uneven terrain.

The training reinforced individual responsibility and teamwork. Airmen monitored themselves and teammates for signs of cold stress and fatigue, managed time outdoors to limit exposure and communicated clearly to maintain safety and efficiency. These habits are essential for sustaining operations in cold environments.

"If we don't find our left and right limits in an exercise setting, we take a chance of failure when the time comes to go downrange. This exercise provides invaluable real-world training to ensure our Airmen are operating at their highest ability when the time comes to answer our nation's call," said Unverzagt.

The Airmen gained practical experience that will inform future missions through providing public affairs and visual information specialties in Arctic conditions. The environment highlighted

equipment limitations, reinforced planning and built familiarity with operating under physical constraints. The result is a more prepared Illinois Air National Guard public affairs force capable of documenting and communicating effectively anytime, anywhere.



Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus, 183rd Wing Public Affairs, captures images during Northern Strike 26-1 at Camp Grayling, Michigan. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Patrick Kerr, 183rd Wing Public Affairs)



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Wynndermere Shaw, a public affairs specialist with the 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, writes caption information during Northern Strike 26-1 Jan. 27, 2026, at Camp Grayling, Michigan. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Jacobus)



Freedom 250

World War I takes Illinois Soldiers from state's prairies to French battlefields

Editor's Note: In 2026, the United States of America will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

As part of the White House and Department of War's Freedom 250 initiative, join us as we look back at Illinois National Guard events which helped America secure, preserve, and celebrate its Independence.

These events, along with other events will be featured throughout 2026 in the Prairie Sentinel, on the Illinois National Guard's Social Media sites, and on the Illinois National Guard website.

From 1917-1919, World War I took the Soldiers from the prairies of Illinois to the battlefields of France.

"I cannot adequately express or, describe, or convey our feelings, and when we passed that immortal gift, the Statue of Liberty from our French brethren across the sea, not knowing when, if ever we would return. I thought to myself, and could only say, 'Lafayette we are coming to repay the debt of gratitude to your country'" wrote

Pvt. Alexander Clay assigned to the 33rd Division as he shipped out for France in May of 1918.

Clay was part of a force of 28,215 strong who would serve from Illinois on the world stage for the first time. Guardsmen from Illinois fought alongside the armies of France, Great Britain and Australia. Illinois Soldiers had plenty of wartime experience, but for the first time, they would experience chemical warfare.

The first of three presidential



The 370th Infantry Regiment, part of the 33rd Division, was the only African American regiment to serve that started out with all black officers. They were the only African American National Guard regiment to serve that had experience serving in both the Spanish American War and the Mexican Border War.

calls for Illinois National Guard Soldiers to serve in the Great War came on March 25, 1917. Eventually these units became the 33rd Division, nicknamed the Prairie Division after the Illinois prairie grass. The units trained at Camp Logan in Houston, Texas, before sailing to France.

There is no better example of the dedication and selflessness of Illinois' contribution to the Great War than Pvt. Farley LaFore Lock of Springfield, Illinois.

Lock, along with his nine siblings, starred in various sports at Springfield High School before serving in the 133rd Regiment of the 33rd Division where he was a medic. The U.S. did not have a medical corps at the time, so the U.S. Army adopted parts of the French and English medical system. Training was limited to a couple of months. In France, as the Army adjusted to new protocols in the field, Lock honed his skills

as a medic. He treated the injured where they fell, often right in the middle of enemy fire. Lock even completed blood transfusions on the battlefield, which was a new and dangerous modern medical advancement.

Lock's squad leader Sgt. Russell Burleigh wrote to Lock's family after Lock's death, describing Lock's dedication to his fellow Soldiers. Burleigh wrote Lock always stepped up when he asked for volunteers.

"It was during the trying times when the enemy was trying to stop the rush of American manhood through the impregnable Argonne Forests that LaFore, after going to the front line and assisting in establishing a first aid post, volunteered to return and bring the remainder of the men up after dark," wrote Burleigh.

In his letter Burleigh described Lock as smiling and joking as he

set off on his mission.

"He never finished his errand, but we all know, and God knows, it was not through any fault of his. A high explosive shell from the gun of an unseen enemy came within five feet of him," said Burleigh.

Lock's left leg was nearly severed, and his right leg was also severely wounded. Burleigh wrote Lock smiled as he used his last words to dryly joke "Well, they got both my legs."

Burleigh wrote "We were 68 days in the woods and strewn battlefields. No baths and very little water. Lafore was the only one in the corps to succumb to wounds... [he] left us nothing to remember him by but his personality, which will never leave us."

LaFore Lock Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 755 in Springfield is named in memory of Lock.



Illinois Air Guard Leaders Visit Air Forces Southern

Illinois Air National Guard senior leaders Brig. Gen. Kevin E. Jacobs, Brig. Gen. Steven B. Rice and Col. Shawn Strahle visited Air Forces Southern for a firsthand look at how Citizen Airmen are helping deliver airpower across the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.

During the visit, leaders engaged with Airmen supporting Operation Southern Spear – seeing how Total Force integration enables AFSOUTH to project airpower, sustain operations and strengthen partnerships across the region, building on more than 16 years of combined operations that reinforce regional security and support SOUTHCOM missions.





Illinois Air National Guard's 182d Medical Group conduct the Periodic Health Assessment (PHA) Quick at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria, Illinois, March 7. The PHA Quick ensures medical readiness of the unit by accomplishing all medical requirements of every airman on base, including laboratory blood draws, vaccinations, dental examinations, etc., in one drill weekend. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Avery Litton, 182nd Airlift Wing)

182nd Medical Group Conducts Periodic Health Assessment Quick



Illinois Air National Guard Airman Katelynn Seballos, a medic with the Illinois Air National Guard's 182d Medical Group checks the vitals of Airman 1st Class Justin Torres, a hydraulics specialist with the 182nd Maintenance Squadron during the Periodic Health Assessment (PHA) Quick at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria, Illinois, March 7.



Illinois Air National Guard Airman 1st Class Jordy Velazquez, an aerospace medical technician with the Illinois Air National Guard's 182d Medical Group conducts a blood draw of Senior Airman Joe Jankowicz, a cyber systems operations specialist with the 264th Combat Communications Squadron during the Periodic Health Assessment (PHA) Quick at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria, Illinois, March 7.



Left, Airmen with the Illinois Air National Guard's 182nd Medical Group conduct the Periodic Health Assessment (PHA) Quick at the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria, Illinois, March 7.

708th Medical Company Prepare for Shuttle Operations, Conduct Casualty Drills



Soldiers of the 708th Medical Company Ground Ambulance check their supplies in preparation for shuttle operations in April on March 7, 2026 in North Riverside.



At left, As part of a casualty drill Spc. Jaden Simos (front) and Spc. Simon Rupniewski, medics with 708th Medical Company Ground Ambulance, carry Pfc. Joel Ocon, a medic with 708th Medical Company Ground Ambulance, on a litter. Above, Spc Jaden Simos (right) checks Pfc. Joel Ocon, while Spc. Simon Rupniewski (left), applies a tourniquet at 26th Street Woods West in La Grange Park, Ill.(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)

1886th Engineer Facilities Detachment Arrives in Illinois following Overseas Deployment

About 15 Soldiers from the 1886th Engineer Facilities Detachment, based in Springfield, were welcomed home Jan. 15 at various locations throughout Illinois, Missouri, and Indiana, after completing a nine-month deployment to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in support of Operation Spartan Shield.

About half the unit were met by families, friends, and fellow Soldiers from the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade at Lambert International Airport in St. Louis over the course of two flights.

The team deployed in April and was expected to provide environmental reporting, short and long-range facility work plans, and Department of Public Works level facility management in support of U.S. Central Command.

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



THIS DAY IN ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD HISTORY



Famous Guardsman John Riley Tanner Becomes 21st Governor of Illinois

Jan. 11, 1897: John Tanner of Boonville, Indiana became the 21st Governor of Illinois on January 11.

He enlisted with the 98th Illinois Infantry in 1863. His father, also in the service, died in a Confederate prison camp. While serving under Major General William Tecumseh Sherman in Kentucky and Georgia, Tanner saw action at Chickamauga and Atlanta.

His unit mustered out in June 1865 and was re-designated the 61st Illinois Infantry. After the war Tanner held positions as a sheriff and state treasurer before becoming governor. He had the distinction of being the first governor to have the National Guard ready for a presidential call-up in the Spanish-American War.

Tanner died in 1901 and is buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield.

Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant Assumes Command of Union Forces in Arkansas

Jan. 22, 1863: Though victorious at the Battle of Fort Hindman, Union Major General John A. McClernand received a minor demotion as punishment for attacking the fort without permission.

His rival and former Illinois Militia commander, Major General Ulysses S. Grant replaced him as commander of Union troops stationed in Arkansas.

This appointment allowed Grant to take the Vicksburg Campaign in a more productive direction. Under his command, the Army of the Tennessee began construction on an extensive canal to allow Union shipping to bypass the Confederate guns at Vicksburg.



Seriously wounded Illinois Soldier Earns Medal of Honor for directing Fire onto Enemy Positions

Jan. 30, 1945: In the bitter fighting on Bougainville in the Solomon Islands, Staff Sergeant Jesse R. Drowley of the 132nd Infantry, (former 66th Brigade, Illinois National Guard) Americal Division braved enemy fire to rescue three wounded comrades from an exposed position.

After successfully moving two of the men to safety, he climbed aboard a tank to direct fire on a hidden enemy bunker. He used tracer rounds from his Thompson sub-machine gun to pinpoint the position for the tank crew.

In the process he took a bullet to both the chest and left eye. Despite these wounds, he remained on the field until the bunker had been destroyed.

For his heroic actions and unflinching devotion to his task he received the Medal of Honor.

State Dedicates Armory at Cairo

Jan. 30, 1932: Ceremonies were held in Cairo, Illinois for the dedication of the new armory.

Governor Louis L. Emmerson and Adjutant General Carlos E. Black inspected the new facility at 11 a.m.

Thousands of people turned out for a 1 p.m. parade in which the 6th Infantry band performed the "Star Spangled Banner."



Officially deactivated, 33rd Division ceases occupation duties in Japan

Feb. 4, 1946: With their services no longer required, the 33rd Infantry Division officially ceased its occupation duties in war torn Japan.

Having been in the country since shortly after the surrender the previous fall, the battle tested unit now looked forward to returning home.

While in Japan the 33rd had primarily oversaw the disposal of captured munitions as well as the deactivation and disarmament of Japanese military units.

State Active Duty Ends after 21 Days for 108th Observation Squadron

Feb. 11, 1937: Twenty-one days of state active duty ended for the 108th Observation squadron, 33rd Division Aviation.

During the disastrous floods in the southern Illinois towns of Karnak, Rosiclare, Mound City, Metropolis and Shawneetown, the 108th played a vital role.

The Airmen provided reconnaissance over levees, dropped food and medicines to stranded people and livestock and took photos of flooded areas.



Illinois National Guard Deploys to Gillespie and Benld to Suppress Violent Protests

March 20, 1911: In March 1911, the Illinois National Guard deployed to the Gillespie and Benld area in Macoupin County, Illinois to suppress violent protests stemming from a coal miner strike.

The conflict arose from a strike by immigrant miners (largely Italian)

against the Northwestern Railroad Coal Company. The miners were protesting new, stricter working conditions introduced by a new superintendent.

On March 20, 1911, nearly 1,000 miners from Benld marched armed with various firearms, rifles, and

shotguns through Gillespie, stopping at mine No. 1 and mine No. 3.

Due to the "ugly mood," of the crowd and threats of riots, the authorities requested the assistance of the Illinois National Guard. Governor Deneen sent 10 companies to guard the mines in the vicinity.

The demonstration passed without incident, but the presence of the militia proved necessary to prevent escalation.





**Field Artillery Soldiers
Partners With Community
to Donate Blood**

The 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment hosted a community blood drive with ImpactLife in conjunction with the battalion's annual Periodic Health Assessment on Feb. 21 at the Illinois Army National Guard armory in Milan. Above, Crystal Desmond prepares to take blood from Sgt. 1st Class Eric Adams. Right, True Schroeder prepares the arm of Illinois Army National Guard Spc. Jose Alba. Below, Pfc. Brendan Brundage gives blood.



Above, Illinois Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Cory Foutch of A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, troubleshoots the navigation system on a M777 Howitzer.

Below, Illinois Army National Guard Sgt. Anh Le and Sgt. Elantae Humphrey, both Soldiers in A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, work on the navigation system on a M777 Howitzer.

It was a busy weekend drill for the 2-123rd Field Artillery. The unit hosted a community blood drive with ImpactLife in conjunction with the battalion's annual Periodic Health Assessment on Feb. 21 in Milan. The unit also hosted several service providers the Soldiers could talk to as they went through the health assessment and they performed maintenance work done on some of their cannons. (U.S. Army photo by Lt. Col. Brad Leighton, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)



Illinois National Guard's 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion Adds Army Green to Forest Park's 30th Annual St. Patrick's Day Parade



Illinois Army National Guard Spc. Angie Cartagena, a Soldier with the 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion, performs preventive maintenance checks and services on a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle prior to using it as part of the Forest Park St. Patrick's Day parade in Forest Park, Ill., on March 7. (U.S. Army photos by Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs)



Soldiers with the 108th Multifunctional Medical Battalion drive a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle as part of the Forest Park St. Patrick's Day parade in Forest Park, Ill., on March 7. This is the 30th anniversary of the parade. The parade is among Forest Park's most popular events and Forest Park is a key recruiting community for the Illinois National Guard. The National Guard is in the process of renovating its facility on Roosevelt Road where it will place a brand-new cutting-edge high technology unit.

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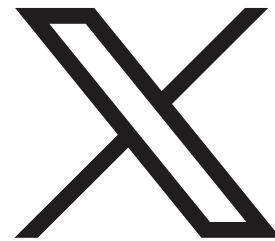
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