



THE GATOR SENTINEL

APRIL 2026

VOL. 1

COMMAND CORNER

Task Force Gator,

We are now more than a month past our Transfer of Authority, having fully assumed the mission from our partners in KFOR 35. In that short time, you have done exactly what was required; maintained continuity, avoided gaps, and ensured a smooth and professional transition.

From our departure at home station, through Fort Hood, to the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Germany, and now here in Kosovo, you have moved through a demanding training and deployment cycle. At every stage, you have shown discipline, adaptability, and commitment to excellence.

I continue to receive feedback that not only did Task Force Gator seamlessly take on this mission; you have already begun improving it. That matters. Our goal is not just to maintain the standard, but to leave this mission better than we found it, and you are already doing that.

As we settle into the mission and grow more comfortable in our roles, I need you to stay focused on what got us here. Take care of yourselves. Take care of your battle buddies. Stay disciplined and remain aware. Comfort is expected, but complacency is not acceptable. Complacency does not move us forward.

We do this by staying safer, stronger, and more prosperous as a team. When we prioritize safety, build strength in one another, and continue to improve every day, we ensure both mission success and a force that is ready for whatever comes next.

For many of you, this deployment did not start here. It started at XCTC, continued through NTC, and carried forward into this mission. It has been a long road, and I recognize the effort and sacrifice it took to get here. I am proud of the work you've put in, and I am proud of how you continue to perform every day.

Keep doing the right things, even when no one is watching. As Ted Lasso reminds us: "Doing the right thing is never the wrong thing."

Stay focused. Take care of each other. And continue moving this mission forward.

From the Front.



COMMAND CORNER

TF Gator KFOR36,

I would like to thank you for everything you've done over the past three months. Not counting October, we are already a third of the way into our deployment. It has truly been a commitment for you to put in the hard work these past few years in preparation for our deployment to Kosovo. I have been in the 53rd IBCT for 24 of the past 28 years in the Florida Guard. I must say that this current formation is the best that I have had the privilege of being a part of. I am continually impressed with the way you get after it. There was much improvement to be made when we arrived here, and you rapidly identified these capability gaps and began to improve your fighting positions.

Upon taking over this mission, the Commander of Kosovo Forces (COMKFOR) immediately realized that the 53rd IBCT redefined the standard for how a professional military organization is supposed to conduct itself. I see it daily when I observe you perform your tasks, when we have our weekly update briefs, when I go on patrols with our kinetic and non-kinetic teams, and when I make visits to Film City, Novo Selo, and Nothing Hill. I feel confident that we will leave this place in better shape than any unit before us.

I am impressed with the way we, as a brigade, perform at such a high level. Independently and collectively, you are competent, confident, resilient, and I feel very comfortable knowing that you guys and gals have my six. You all are fine Americans. I am proud to be able to say that I am the Command Sergeant Major of the 53rd IBCT, and it is because of your hard work and sacrifice. Thank you for your service.

Miguel Hernandez

CSM, Task Force Gator



CSM MIGUEL HERNANDEZ
RC-E Brigade Command Sgt. Maj.

CHAPLAINS CORNER

Grateful

I miss my wife and kids today. Honestly, I miss them often. Some days are worse than others. That is one of my struggles. You have your own. Perhaps, you struggle to understand decisions that are made by leaders. Maybe you are getting restless, because you haven't had much opportunity to leave base. You could be anxiety ridden due to problems back home. There are endless permutations of problems and circumstances that could lead you to have a bad day.

Today, I miss my family more than other days, but I am also keenly aware of how immensely I have been blessed. I am overwhelmed by God's goodness to me in providing me the opportunity to deploy with you and serve you. As added blessings, many Americans will go their entire lives without enjoying some of the adventures you and I will experience this year. We have been provided with the opportunity to mobilize with one of the most efficient, well-trained organizations in the Army. We are deployed to a place of truly breathtaking beauty which will only increase as summer approaches. The food is pretty good, and the living arrangements are some of the best an OCONUS deployment can provide.

As I consider these realities, I am grateful. These truths do not remove the set of circumstances that make hard days hard, but gratitude does tend to shine light into dark places. Gratitude helps to remove some of the sting of grief, boredom, loneliness, disappointments, and various other factors that make deployments challenging. I would never invalidate the difficulties you face, but I do want to encourage you to endeavor to focus on the blessings more than the challenges. Try not to be so blinded by what you do not have that you lose sight of what you are receiving. It is my prayer that you intentionally look for opportunities to be grateful and enjoy the next few months. May gratitude protect you from misery.

If you need help, there is no shame in that. You have Religious Support Teams that care about you and are available to you. You have one of the best Behavioral Health teams I have ever seen, and you have battle buddies who would provide a listening ear. Whatever you do, don't suffer alone.

With love,
Chaplain Hornback



LTC MICHEAL HORNBACK
RC-E Chaplain

NCO of The Month

SSG Rey Perez is a purpose-driven leader who sets the standard through discipline, professionalism, and mentorship. As the Preventive Medicine NCOIC, he invests in the development of Soldiers and Noncommissioned Officers by creating structured plans to help achieve their goals. His leadership, rooted in respect, professional communication, and integrity, fosters a positive command climate, enhances readiness, and drives mission success.

SSG Perez has made a significant impact on force health protection across Regional Command East through his leadership of a comprehensive preventive medicine program. He conducts an average of 12 food facility inspections monthly, enforcing Tri-Service Food Code standards and ensuring sanitation compliance. His water surveillance efforts ensure the delivery of safe, potable water to Soldiers. Beyond his technical expertise, SSG Perez demonstrates exceptional leadership by organizing weekly ruck marches and creating individualized physical fitness plans, further enhancing unit readiness and morale.



SGT REY PEREZ
RC-E TF Medical Preventative Med NCOIC

Soldier of The Month



SPC Alexander Murry proudly continues his family's legacy of military service, inspired by his father, a former Special Forces operator, and his grandfather, a Vietnam War veteran. Dedicated to self-improvement, SPC Murry is passionate about personal fitness, often encouraging others to join him in workouts. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games, watching TV, and advancing his education to further his career.

SPC Murry earned the title of Soldier of the Month for his exceptional contributions to Regional Command East. Upon arrival, he quickly assumed duties as an LMT specialist, working extended hours to master daily situation report (DSR) requirements. His commitment to mission readiness and his team-first attitude have been exemplary. SPC

Murry maintained clear communication with his leaders, ensuring accountability during missions. His active listening and rapport-building skills during Soldier Lead Engagements strengthened relationships between his team and the people of Kosovo, directly enhancing mission success. His adaptability and professionalism, developed through pre-deployment training, highlight his transition from skilled Infantryman to a vital member of the Liaison Monitoring Team.

BEHIND THE SCENE OF EVERY LIFE SAVED

THERE IS A SPC LEZAMA



Staff Sgt. Marc Marmeto

134 PAD

Standing among nearly a 100 Soldiers during Advanced Individual Training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, Spc. Kailin Lezama noticed something that set her class apart. Only twenty of them were women, a small minority in a technical field many still assume belongs to men.

Instead of feeling isolated, she found something

different.

“It brought a form of camaraderie within our group,” Lezama said. “No one felt alienated or singled out. We all just wanted to help each other out as much as possible. Even though we were females, we never faced any discrimination with the males. It showed me that everyone in the Army helps each other out.”

Now serving as a biomedical equipment specialist in the

Florida Army National Guard with Company C, Medical Company, 53rd Brigade Support Battalion, Lezama operates in one of the Army’s most technically demanding medical fields.

Her job is rarely seen by patients, but its impact is felt everywhere medical care happens.

Lezama installs, maintains and repairs critical medical systems, from X-ray machines and life-support monitors to laboratory diagnostic equipment. Every piece of equipment must function with precision, whether in a hospital environment or a deployed medical facility supporting Soldiers in the field.

While combat medics are often recognized for treating casualties at the point of injury, Lezama works behind the scenes ensuring the technology they depend on works when it matters most.

Quiet and reserved by nature, Lezama prefers the technical focus of her role, carefully diagnosing problems and restoring complex equipment to working order. The responsibility can be daunting, especially knowing that a malfunctioning machine could impact patient care.

Despite having only recently graduated high school before beginning her Army career, she has already faced moments during training that tested her confidence.

During a pre-mobilization training exercise at Fort Hood,

UNSUNG HEROES: Biomedical Specialists



Spc. Kaitlin Lezama, a biomedical equipment specialist in the Florida Army National Guard with Company C, Medical Company, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, assigned to NATO's Kosovo Force Regional Command East, serves as a crucial behind the scenes team member for medical operations at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Marc Marmeto)

the mission of saving lives. Experiences and training where Soldiers rise to the occasion establishes the importance of every role within a medical unit.

For Lezama, service in the Army also carries a deeper personal meaning.

She says being the only Soldier in her unit with her specialized skillset has become both a challenge and a source of pride.

"It's empowering being the only person in my unit with my skillset," Lezama said. "I hope that I can inspire someone back home just like how I was inspired by the women in my community who were in roles I thought would only go to men."

Through her work, Lezama represents the often unseen backbone of military medicine, a specialist who ensures the equipment behind every diagnosis, treatment and lifesaving intervention is ready when people need it most.

Texas, Lezama participated in a mass casualty scenario that required rapid evacuation of multiple simulated casualties of varying sizes and conditions.

"There are moments during training where self-doubt comes into play," Lezama said. "It was scary arriving to the helipad and being in the HUMVEE, but I just pushed through it. At the end of the day, I looked back and was in shock that I did all of that."

Whether treating patients directly or maintaining the equipment used in their care, each Soldier contributes to

"It brought a form of camaraderie within our group," she said. "No one felt alienated or singled out. We all just wanted to help each other out."



Spc. Kaitlin Lezama, a biomedical equipment specialist in the Florida Army National Guard with Company C, Medical Company, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, assigned to NATO's Kosovo Force Regional Command East, serves as a crucial behind the scenes team member for medical operations at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Marc Marmeto)



Kosovo Forces share leadership experiences with University of Pristina students

Capt. Balinda O'Neal 134th MPAD

Service members from NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) Regional Command East (RC-E) joined representatives from Kosovo institutions and the academic community for a panel discussion at the University of Pristina March 4 focused on leadership, professional development and public service.

Held in recognition of International Women's Day, the event brought together military and civilian professionals to share career expe-

riences and leadership perspectives with students. The discussion was moderated by Prof. Ass. Dr. Remzie Shahini-Hoxhaj, vice dean for projects and infrastructure at the University of Pristina, who welcomed the panelists and highlighted the role of universities in fostering dialogue between students and professionals from military and public institutions.

Throughout the discussion, panelists emphasized the importance of education, resilience and preparation in developing leadership across military and civilian organizations, noting that diverse

perspectives strengthen institutions and improve decision-making.

Turkish Armed Forces Lt. Tamara Kaynar, public affairs media operations officer for KFOR, shared how her career began in academia before transitioning into military service, emphasizing the importance of professionalism and preparation.

"Performance speaks louder than gender," Kaynar said. "When you are disciplined, prepared and professional, respect follows."

"The military is not just about fighting," she said. "It is about leadership, teamwork, crisis

management and cooperation.”

Maj. TJ Coleman, public affairs director for KFOR RC-E, reflected on lessons learned during nearly three decades of military service and encouraged students to remain persistent when pursuing professional goals.

“The time is going to pass anyway, so just do it,” Coleman said, recalling advice from her grandmother that has guided her throughout her career.

“Stay prepared because you never know when the opportunity will come,” Coleman said.

“Show that you are competent,” she added. “No rank can beat that.”

Panelists also discussed leadership representation across institutions and noted that women currently make up approximately eight percent of KFOR personnel.

Speakers highlighted examples of women serving in senior leadership roles across Kosovo’s institutions, noting that Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008, has had two women serve as president.

Following the panel discussion, students participated in a question-and-answer session focused on career development, leadership challenges and experiences working in international environments.

Panelists encouraged students to pursue opportunities in public service and emphasized that preparation, education and professional competence are essential elements of leadership.

Events such as this provide opportunities for dialogue between KFOR personnel, Kosovo institutions and the academic community while encouraging students to explore careers in public service and leadership.

KFOR continues to support a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement for all communities in Kosovo in accordance with its United Nations mandate.

U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Marc Marmeto

Army Maj. TJ Coleman speaks at a women's conference at the University of Pristina, March 4, 2026. Women in positions of leadership across Kosovo, to include KFOR, came to participate and speak with students.





Staff Sgt. Kayla Scott, a Veterinary Food Inspection Specialist assigned to the Kosovo Force Regional Command-East Veterinary Services team, places a thermometer in fresh batch of Spinach to verify the welfare of the produce coming in to Camp Bondsteel, Friday, March 20, 2026.

Staff Sgt. Spencer Rhodes 53rd IBCT

Ask any number of Soldiers, “Who do you think inspects food items when they arrive on base?” and you’ll probably get a plethora of guesses ranging from logistics to medical. Most would never assume that it is in fact your veterinarian staff that handles food inspection for anything used prior to cooking.

Staff Sgt. Kayla Scott, a reserve soldier assigned to NATO’s Kosovo Force, Regional

Command East (RC-E) Veterinary Services team, is the sole Veterinary Food Inspection Specialist for RC-East, and is responsible for multiple sites across, and an additional site in Bosnia at Camp Butmir.

As soon as a truck arrives, Scott inspects the refrigeration trucks’ temperatures and packaging before it’s allowed to be unloaded. The goal is not just quality control for food welfare, but also about verifying contracts are being honored and that the Army isn’t spending money on wasted food.

Whereas an uninformed observer may look at all the various boxes, labels, barcodes and stamps and see no issue, Scott can quickly tell when something is off because it’s missing a label, or stamped date.

“You do these inspections so much, you get used to what products we get or even what boxes look new,” she says, as she picks out a rectangular box off a pallet. The contents: Fresh pepperoni she didn’t recognize from previous deliveries. After a quick inspection of its tags and stamps, it’s deemed good to go.

She continues the inspection by checking the time stamps on the cooler trucks, verifying they were not only cool enough, but remained that way through the entire trip. Pieces of produce are selected for inspection. A temperature reading is taken, and then it’s sliced open to visually check the quality. After she’s finished inspecting the deliveries, she continues with her weekly check of the cleaning stations and the

Did you know?

food storage.

It's a very detailed and smooth process, one that in her experience, hasn't always been very smooth. On her last deployment to Kuwait, she was responsible for traveling to over 5 countries to conduct inspections. Sometimes drivers had turned off a refrigeration truck and turned it back on, but not before food spoiled. Packaging would be damaged or intentionally slashed open.

Scott says that it was a great way to learn, but at Camp Bondsteel, she doesn't have to worry about any of those issues.

They have a really well maintained facility," said Scott. "Here, it's almost always perfect. It makes it an easier process, between the consistency, organization and the people we work alongside. They really have it down and know what right looks like."

So ... why the Army Vet Corp for food inspection? Scott explains that the food inspection process often starts with animals pre-mortem [still alive] with inspection specialists and a Vet visiting processing centers regularly to ensure animals are healthy enough to be consumed as food. Some inspection specialists even work at the plant as a liaison full time.

That's what keeps it tied to the Vet Corp," said Scott.

Staff Sgt. Kayla Scott verifies cooler information at the Camp Bondsteel Dining Facility during a weekly inspection, Friday, March 20th, 2026. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Spencer Rhodes)

Staff Sgt. Kayla Scott selects oranges before cutting them open for quality control for a new shipment of produce at a weekly inspection at the Camp Bondsteel Dining Facility, Friday, March 20th, 2026. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Spencer Rhodes)

"They have a really well maintained facility here."



Staff Sgt. Kayla Scott, (Left) a Veterinary Food Inspection Specialist with NATO's Kosovo Force, Regional Command-East veterinary services team, places a food thermometer in a recently delivered cup of yogurt, verifying its in a healthy temperature range for dairy, at a Camp Bondsteel food delivery, Friday, March 20th, 2026.

Walking Blood Bank Prescreening



At the TMC, April 17, all day

Dear Future Walking Blood Bank Volunteer,

I want to reach out personally and say THANK YOU! Because of your selflessness, we can increase our blood availability by over 200%!! This means LIVES SAVED!

Please also alert your command of your participation in the WBB to ensure your commanders have accountability. Thank you again for your gift to your fellow soldiers at their time of extreme need!

Stay safe and keep caring for others.



KFOR 36 RC-EAST TF MED
WALKING BLOOD BANK
(WBB)





MHS Military Health System
health.mil

Mass Casualty

The term MASCAL stands for Mass Casualty, which refers to an incident involving a large number of casualties and the number of injured individuals surpasses what can be managed by readily available resources.

The Day of MASCAL:

How would I know? -Loud speaker announcement will be made, and Signal chat notification will be sent out.

Where would I go? – As a donor you will go to the TMC pharmacy area next to the laboratory, building 1370.

What would I do? – Donate 1 unit of blood.

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Joint Trauma System (JTS) Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPG) Whole Blood Transfusion, JP 04-02 Joint Health Services, TM 8-227-11 Operational Procedures for the Armed Services Blood Program (ASBP) Elements, TM 8-227-12 ASBP Joint Program Handbook, and local lab standard operating procedures (SOP)



ASBP
Armed Services Blood Program



KFOR 36 RC-EAST TF MED WALKING BLOOD BANK (WBB)



WHAT IS THIS

A HEROIC OPPORTUNITY TO SAVES LIVES!

In the case of an emergency where your fellow soldiers need blood, we would need donors to save their life.

A “walking blood bank” refers to a system where individuals volunteer to be potential blood donors for specific patients who may need transfusions. This system is often used in emergencies such as Mass Casualty (MASCAL).

Key things to know about this system include eligibility criteria, the donation process, and how it ensures the safety of both the donors and the recipients.

Deployment Highlights



Photo Captions

- 1.** Soldiers from NATO's Kosovo Force Regional Command-East come together for an interoperability photo during a training flight, Monday, March 30, 2026. (Army photo by Staff Sgt. Spencer Rhodes)
- 2.** Tennessee Army National Guardsmen, assigned to Kosovo Force (KFOR) Regional Command East with Det. 3, Company C, 1st Battalion, 135th Aviation Regiment, conduct SKEDCO hoisting and tag line procedures with Latvian soldiers during a medical evacuation training exercise at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, March 3, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Azavyon McFarland)
- 3.** US and NATO partner nationals, all assigned to Kosovo Force's Regional Command East, compete in a Morale, Wellness and Recreation organized volleyball tournament at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo. (U.S. Army photo by Cpt. Balinda O'Neal)
- 4.** Florida Army National Guard Soldiers with 153rd Cavalry Squadron, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, deployed in support of NATO's Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, participate in a Crowd-Riot-Control validation exercise at Camp Novo Selo, Kosovo, March 16th, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Azavyon McFarland)
- 5.** Spc. Daniel Tatum, assigned to 153rd Cavalry Squadron, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team in support of NATO's Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, prepares a Unmanned Aircraft System for launch, while training on the new systems at Camp Novo Selo, Kosovo, Tuesday, March 31st, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Lacount)
- 6.** U.S. Army Reserve Maj. Christine Bui, a veterinarian with the 7360th Veterinary Detachment assigned to NATO-led Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, performs a spay surgery on a local puppy at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, March 23, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Azavyon McFarland)
- 7.** U.S. Soldiers assigned to 153rd Cavalry Squadron, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, currently deployed in support of NATO-led Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, conduct slingload training at Camp Novo Selo, Wednesday, March 18, 2016. The training was conducted alongside a contingent of Swiss Army Soldiers also deployed to Kosovo under RC-East. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Lacount.)
- 8.** First Lt. David Santana, a Kosovo Police Liaison Officer and Sgt. Lauren Darcy, an electromagnetic warfare specialist, both assigned to 53rd Infantry Combat Team in support of NATO's Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, meet with Lt. Col. Rexhep Sijarina, a Kosovo border police director, during a key leader engagement in Kacanik, Kosovo, March 27, 2026. (Army photo by Pfc. Azavyon McFarland)
- 9.** Florida Army National Guard Maj. Justin Howland, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team chief of staff, assigned to NATO-led Kosovo Force Regional Command East utilizes a bite sleeve while interacting with Sgt. Busa, a K9 with the 131st Military Working Dog Detachment-Europe, at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, March 19, 2026. (Army photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Lacount)
- 10.** Florida Army National Guard Soldiers with 153rd Cavalry Squadron, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team assigned to NATO led Kosovo Force, Regional Command East, conduct training on Unmanned Aircraft Systems at Camp Novo Selo, March 31, 2026. (Army photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Lacount)
- 11.** Sgt. Samantha Floyd flexes for the camera after winning the female category in the Camp Bondsteel powerlifting 600lb club competition(735 lbs to be exact), Saturday, March 28, 2026. Floyd is deployed with the Florida Army National Guard's 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team in support of NATO-led Kosovo Force Regional Command East. (Army photo by Staff Sgt. Marc Marmeto)
- 12.** Spc. Tracey King and Pfc. Tekoa Duckworth, assigned to A-Troop, 153rd Cavalry Squadron, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, pose for a photo prior to the start of Crowd-Riot-Control validation training at Camp Novo Selo, March 16, 2026. King and Duckworth are currently deployed in support of NATO-led Kosovo Force, Regional Command East. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Azavyon McFarland.)



Gator Outreach Program Presents:

Pristina Animal Shelter

Saturdays from 0800-1700

What You Can Do:

-  Play with Dogs
-  Build & Clean Shelters
-  Earn hours towards your Volunteer Service Medal



Sign-Up



POC: SGT Aryanna Fortuna
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KOSOVO FORCE 36 PHOTOS



SCAN HERE!

YOUR UNIT. YOUR STORY.

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Imagery Approved For Release



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134th PAD

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We hope you've enjoyed the content featured in this newsletter and across multiple social media platforms, DVIDS, and the public photo drive. If you have story ideas, photos, or events you'd like highlighted, we welcome your submissions and are happy to help share your story. The earlier content is submitted, the better we can support future coverage.

