

# Illinois

VOL. 63, No. 6



# VFW

# News

MAY 2026



***After 50 years,  
King Kahok Returns  
to Collinsville VFW***

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# Department of Illinois

## Fact Sheet

### About us

The VFW traces its roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. Many arrived home sick or wounded. There was no medical care or veterans' pension for them and they were left to care for themselves.

### Vision

Ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country.

### Mission

To foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans.

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### Get in Touch

**Phone:** 217-529-6688

**Facebook:** VFW State of Illinois

**Email:** [vwil@vwil.org](mailto:vwil@vwil.org)

### 2024/2025 metrics

**\$280,230** Service Members Assistance  
**\$44,676** Military Appreciation Programs

**191,825** Total VFW/AUX Volunteer Hours

**82 Scholarships and** Help A Hero  
**\$386,918 Awarded** Scholarship

**1,439** Voice of Democracy Student Participation

**209,000** Poppies Distributed

**4,288** Patriots Pen Student Participation

**46,342** VA Claims Processed  
**\$102,082,288** Amount Recovered

### Did You Know?

**34,150** Members as of June 30, 2025

December 11, 1920 Charter Date

2025-2026 State Commander Eugene Blackwell

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# STATE COMMANDER'S CORNER



**Eugene Blackwell**  
**Commander**  
**Department of Illinois VFW**

Comrades and Auxiliary Members,

As I've traveled across our districts here in Illinois, I've had the opportunity to see firsthand the work being done at our posts and within our Auxiliary. I've been impressed and, more importantly, encouraged. That work that is led at the post and district level, is what continues to strengthen our organization and keep our mission moving forward.

Our advocacy remains strong at both the state and federal levels. Recently, our National Legislative Team led a delegation from Illinois to speak directly with lawmakers on issues that matter to veterans. We focused on keeping our promises, bringing missing service members home, recognizing the sacrifices of our National Guard and Reserve, and making sure veterans are treated with the respect they've earned.

We spoke with one voice, and it made a difference. We didn't do it alone. Our Auxiliary stood right beside us, reinforcing the message and helping hold our elected officials accountable. That partnership matters.

Now we need to bring that same level of focus to membership.

We're in the final stretch – our PUSH (Prayer Until Something Happens) that happens is to reach 102 percent. To those districts already over 100 percent, you're close – stay after it. For everyone else, now is the time to move. Growth won't come from simply asking someone to join. It comes from showing them who we are and what we do.

Use your Illinois Fact Sheet. Tell your story. That sheet reflects the work you've entered into the dashboard; community service,

veterans' assistance, youth programs, legislative efforts. That's not just data, it's our report card. It shows the real impact we're making across the state.

If you followed Illinois basketball and saw their run to the Final Four, you saw what focus and teamwork can do. That didn't happen overnight, it took effort and discipline. We need to approach our mission the same way. Recruit with purpose, mentor the veterans we bring in, and stay committed to serving our communities.

As of today (12 April 2026), our current membership totals by district are as follows:

Dist	Current	Prior	Percentage
3	1,180	1,245	94.77%
4	1,592	1,611	98.82%
5	1,996	2,043	97.69%
6	1,890	2,041	92.60%
7	<b>1,516</b>	<b>1,509</b>	<b>100.46%</b>
8	1,515	1,598	94.80%
9	<b>1,411</b>	<b>1,396</b>	<b>101.07%</b>
10	<b>1,803</b>	<b>1,799</b>	<b>100.22%</b>
11	963	1,009	95.44%
12	1,957	2,009	97.41%
13	<b>1,335</b>	<b>1,332</b>	<b>100.22%</b>
14	2,889	2,923	98.83%
15	1,188	1,215	97.77%
16	1,404	1,426	98.45%
17	1,655	1,698	97.46%
18	1,472	1,556	94.60%
19	3,194	3,250	98.27%
99	3,603	3,707	97.19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32,563</b>	<b>33,367</b>	<b>97.59%</b>

Membership remains one of our top priorities, and I want to take a moment to recognize the individuals who are making a real impact in this area.

I extend my sincere thanks to every recruiter who has brought in at least one new member. That effort matters. Each new member

strengthens our organization and expands our reach by serving veterans and their families.

As of April 12, 2026, our state leader in recruiting is Joshua Seed, who has recruited an outstanding 25 new members. That level of commitment sets the standard and demonstrates what can be accomplished with focus and dedication.

We also recognize our top seven recruiters, whose names are listed below. Their efforts reflect the kind of leadership and initiative that drives our organization forward.

District	Post #	Recruiter	Members
10	755	Joshua Seed	25
19	3873	Philip L. Maughan	14
19	2801	Dan N. Thomas	10
7	454	Jimmie D. Waters	9
19	1197	Bryan R. Kelsey	8
15	3455	Robert Paul Boyce Jr.	7
7	454	David R. Long Jr.	6
9	2470	Scott E. Heyob	6
9	2602	Eric D. Thurman	6
10	10302	Martin E. Fruchtl	6
13	2244	David B. Blann	6
13	4226	Nancy J. O'Connell	6
13	9153	Benjamin W. Newborn	6

Let this be both recognition for the work already done and a reminder of what still lies ahead. There are veterans in every one of our communities who are eligible to join the Veterans of Foreign Wars and simply haven't been asked. That's where we come in.

As we move forward, I'm asking every Post and every member to stay focused on recruiting. Make the ask. Share your story. Bring in those veterans who can both benefit from and strengthen our organization.

Let's keep building on the momentum we have and continue growing our ranks. This takes commitment – from each of us and from all of us working together. The opportunity is there. Now it's up to us to act.

Let's finish strongly. Let us stay focused. And let us meet – and exceed – our goal of 102%-Lets PUSH.

Illinois - Keep doing the work of the VFW.

Eugene Blackwell  
Department Commander - Illinois

# Illinois VFW News

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## ILLINOIS VFW NEWS COMMITTEE

Eugene Blackwell ..... State Commander  
 Scott Swinford ..... State Adjutant-Quartermaster  
 Brett Nila ..... Committee Chairman  
 Bobby Welch ..... State Historian  
 Barb Wilson ..... Editor

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## STATE OFFICERS

Commander	Eugene Blackwell	311	District 16
Sr. Vice	Rob Bailey	7452	District 19
Jr. Vice	Ryan Higginbotham	4266	District 13
Adj./Qm	Scott Swinford	4168	District 11
Judge Advocate	Jayson Hoffman	4763	District 10
Surgeon	Doug Jameson	1739	District 14
Chaplain	Gary Holmes	342	District 6
Chief of Staff	Robert Welch	2791	District 16
Inspector	Cathy Stubbs	7710	District 14
Jr. Past Cmdr	Maurice Bridges	4183	District 14
NCM	Matthew Claussen	2868	District 4

## DISTRICT COMMANDERS

3	Zhi Chen	Post 5079	Chicago
4	Evamarie Duff	Post 2868	Brookfield
5	Mathius Carter	Post 12014	Crystal Lake
6	Rob Bland	Post 1461	Belvidere
7	David Long	Post 454	Bloomington
8	Kenneth Morey	Post 1422	Bushnell
9	John Finnegan	Post 5506	Marseilles
10	Joshua Seed	Post 755	Springfield
11	Rick Hobbs	Post 4495	Taylorville
12	Anthony Avers	Post 976	Troy
13	Robert Shehorn	Post 2055	Centralia
14	Amiee Louer-Wagoner	Post 7710	New Athens
15	Clarence Caraker	Post 3455	Anna
16	William Browne	Post 311	Richton Park
17	James Thorne	Post 7862	Arcola
18	Paul Cravens	Post 725	Mokena
19	Michaelangelo Di Cosola	Post 5815	Lombard

# AUXILIARY PRESIDENT'S CORNER

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**Diane Ahrens**  
**President**  
**Department of Illinois**  
**VFW Auxiliary**

I am sitting here looking at this screen and my mind is flooded with awe and wonder at what an Awesome God we serve.

It has been an honor to serve as your President, our PDP's, Line Officers, District Presidents, Program Chairs, Chief of Staff and Deputies, and our Auxiliary members have truly been a wonderful network and embodiment of what an Auxiliary should be.

Our members have stepped up and fulfilled the "Leave no member or Auxiliary Behind". When I have asked for members to go and mentor, encourage, help walk them through a challenge, you all have stepped up. You helped the Auxiliaries to see what needed to be corrected without being judgmental or condescending. You helped them to find solutions, lifting one another up and encouraging them that it is worth working thru the tough times to be able to serve our veterans.

Communication has been extremely important, opening communication with our VFW Post Commanders and members as well as our Auxiliaries. Just like marriage we can't read one another's minds, I appreciate those

who went into the challenging situations, and overcame the obstacles, I personally don't like confrontation, hard to believe as a Marine, but it is true. This year even the most challenging have been resolved, and I want to encourage every member that being able to serve our veterans, bring hope and purpose to our Post and Auxiliary is worth working through those difficult times.

I am so thankful for everyone working together to have the opportunity to bring this year to a close and preparing for 2026-27 to be able to pass on a strong, hardworking Auxiliary. Your creativity, encouragement, wisdom, sense of responsibility, has been phenomenal. Your initiative, seeing something that needs to be done and doing it, not waiting for something to happen. Our District Presidents have been great at being aware of situations and getting help before it leads to closure. I am so thankful for each of you!

Semper Fi, our God is Always Faithful!

Diane Ahrens,  
President 2025-2026

# How to vote at the Department Convention

*By Fritz Mihelcic*

Every year at Department Convention, without fail, there are instances of members not knowing how to vote. Hopefully this short synopsis will assist you all in being able to make informed decisions when we meet again in June.

There are three ways to vote Post Delegate strength at the convention. The Post Delegate Strength is one vote for every 30 members in the Post. Choices must be made when you register in person at the convention and those choices have consequences. In the examples below, Post X is entitled to 10 votes.

1. A member of the Post is attending: This person registers as a member of the Post and is entitled to vote only the Post Delegate strength during an election. You will hear the phrase "Post X you have 10 votes". This will occur regardless how many members of Post X register.

2. Commander and a member of the Post are attending: The Commander [or if the Commander is not present, the Senior and if neither are present, the Junior] should register as the Commander and the member registers as a member. The Commander [or Senior/Junior] gets ONE vote because of the elected position they hold and this is not part of the Post Delegate Strength. Having a member also register allows for the full Post Delegate Strength to be voted. This is where you hear the phrase "Post X, you have ONE plus 10 votes", for example. The one is the Commander vote and the 10 are the Post Delegate strength votes.

3. Commander is the only person from the Post attending: This is where most of the confusion arises. This also applies if only the Senior or Junior attend because the others are not present.

a. If the Commander registers as the Commander, the Commander is only entitled to the Commander vote, namely, ONE vote. There is no additional member so there are no Post Delegate Strength votes available. In our example, Post X gets one vote.

b. If the Commander registers as a MEMBER of the Post, there is no Commander vote. However, the Commander now gets to vote the Post Delegate Strength! In our example, Post X now gets 10 votes.

Obviously, Scenario Two is the best one as you maximize the voting strength. However, if you fall into Scenario Three, your best bet as a Commander is to register as a member and forego the one Commander vote. It is the responsibility of the Commander [or Senior/Junior] to know what is going on and who you have present from your Post.

When the election starts, a Post number will be called and the total votes available will be provided to the voting person. If they disagree with the voting strength, they will be directed to the Convention Committee for discussion and the voting will move forward. Know what your status is and that you have registered to the best benefit of your Post. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure and this will make our elections move smoothly!





**Dan West**  
**Adjutant General**  
**Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States**

Dan West was appointed the Adjutant General of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. on July 21, 2022, at the 123rd VFW National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri.

Dan served in the United States Marine Corps from 1983 to 1994, serving in Operation Desert Storm.

He joined the VFW in 1996 at Post 3413 in San Marcos, Texas, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership. He served in elected and appointed positions at the Post, District and Department Levels, culminating with his election as Department Commander in 2015, in which he achieved Triple Crown All-American status.

Dan worked at the Department of Texas VFW for 15 years culminating the last three years as the State Adjutant/Quartermaster. On the national level, he has served as Vice Chair on the National Military Services and Iraq/Afghanistan Committees, as a member of the National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, Veterans and Military Support Committee, a Special Aide-de-Camp, a national certified recruiter, and as a member of the National Council of Administration representing the Department of Texas.



He is a member of the Disabled American Veterans, and the Marine Corps League.

Dan and his wife Beth, reside in Texas.

-vfw-

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# Virginia Carman

## *Past National President*

Past National President Virginia Carman of Renton, Washington, currently serves the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) of the United States Auxiliary as National Parliamentarian.

In 2007-2008 as National President, she introduced her theme, "*Tradition of Caring*," and emphasized that traditions are important, not only to her but to our organization as a whole.



Eligible through her father, Donald Bracken, who served in the U.S. Army in Korea, she was raised in an active VFW/Auxiliary home. Her father was VFW State Commander and served 10 years as State Quartermaster, and her mother served as Auxiliary Department President.

Virginia began her 54-year involvement with the Auxiliary by serving as President of the newly formed Junior Girls Unit at the age of 10. At age 16, she joined Rainier Auxiliary 2289 and has been an active member, serving three terms as President and several terms as Treasurer.

She has served the organization in other capacities, including District President, National Hospital & VAVS Deputy Director and National Western Conference Chairman for the Community Service and Americanism Programs. When she served as Department President in 1998-1999, she was named Outstanding President of the Year in her membership group.

In 2011, she was elected to serve the VFW National Home on its Board of Trustees. Her six-year term representing District 12 ran through 2017. She also served as President of the National Home Board from 2015-2016.

In 2000, she earned a bachelor's degree at City University while working full-time and holding several positions in the Auxiliary.

Virginia worked for the VFW Department of Washington for 13 years helping veterans with their VA claims, then 17 years as a manager for PACCAR, Inc., maker of Kenworth and Peterbilt trucks.

Her family includes four stepchildren and three step-grandchildren.

# Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Honors 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders of 2026

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the USDVA Women's Health Department at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center March 16 announced the 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026 at Malcolm X College. Women veterans were nominated for their extraordinary leadership, contributions, and commitment to the women veteran community.

"It is my honor to congratulate these 25 exceptional veterans – Illinois women whose inspiring dedication and community leadership represent the very best of our state," said Governor JB Pritzker. "This incredible group continues to make a lasting impact and shape a brighter future for all women veterans."

"The women selected were among an impressive collection of nominees," said IDVA Director Terry Prince. "Each woman veteran has identified unmet needs and challenges and bravely approached them with innovation and determination, resulting in a profound impact on the community."

Of the 25 women leaders honored, nine are members of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"To become a leader you need, driving innovation and positive change through expertise, dedication, and commitment to excellence. While also empowering, mentoring, and inspiring others to achieve their full potential! These Veterans have shown that strength and compassion can walk side by side, that leadership is rooted in service and that the impact of a Veteran extends far beyond the battlefield," said USDVA Program Director Angela St. Paul.

The program included remarks by IDVA Director Terry Prince and a keynote address from Ashley Tuburan, U.S. Navy veteran, attorney, and founder of DONUT MESS WITH HER, LLC. Ashley was in the first class of honorees in 2025. The honorees were presented with personalized awards and enjoyed networking and refreshments.

The program was coordinated by IDVA Women Veterans Program Coordinator Margo Watson and USDVA Program Specialist Angela St. Paul.



## **Staci Boyer, U.S. Navy**

Staci Boyer is a U.S. Navy Gulf War Veteran who served 12 years as a Hospital Corpsman and Surgical Technician.

Today, she channels that same dedication into serving her community and empowering others. Staci is the Founder and CEO of Motiv8n'U and Phoenix Productions, an award-winning author, IFBB Pro, NPC Bodybuilding Competition Promoter, personal trainer, motivational speaker, and transformational wellness coach.

With more than 37 years in the health and wellness industry and a Master of Fitness Sciences from ISSA, along with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science, she brings a wealth of expertise and passion to help others unlock their potential.

In addition to her professional achievements, Staci is a committed leader in the veteran community. She is serving her second term as the Commander of the Judd Kendall VFW Post 3873 in Naperville, earning All American status. She also represents the State of Illinois on the National Legislative Committee for Veterans

Affairs, and holds key leadership roles as Legislative and Women's Program Chairperson for VFW District 19.

She recently spearheaded the development of new legislation to improve Veterans Burial rights Public Act 103-0841.

Staci also co-chairs a veteran-owned business group that uplifts and empowers fellow entrepreneurs and has recently been appointed to the advisory board for The Veterans Business Project. Deeply rooted in her hometown, Staci is active with both the Naperville Rotary and Chamber of Commerce.

Her dedication to service was recently recognized at the highest level, as she was honored with the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award for Volunteerism. A passionate advocate for wellness, empowerment, and those who have served, Staci Boyer continues to inspire, lead, and uplift her community every step of the way.

### **Melissa Farmer-Hill, U.S. Army**

Melissa Farmer-Hill, a member of Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, is a retired U.S. Army Combat Veteran and advocate for women Veterans.



As Founder of Shero Coffee Club and author of Army Strong Women, she leads a purpose-driven coffee and tea initiative honoring women Veterans through storytelling and engagement. She is the creator and host of Shero Coffee Chat, a weekly livestream platform for the Veteran community, and has hosted Shero Uncorked for five years — an annual gathering fostering connection and empowerment. She also leads and supports Veterans Coffee Chats throughout the Chicagoland area, strengthening community engagement and advancing Veteran-centered collaboration.

In 2025, she served as keynote speaker for the Jesse Brown VA Women's Health Program, Women Warriors, the Park Forest Veterans Commission's "Her Story, Her Legacy" program, and Top-Flight Defense Inc.'s Empower and Enlighten event.

A lifetime member of VFW Post 311, she

serves as Resource Coordinator, organizing community partners and service providers for the annual Veteran and Family Resource Fair. She also chairs the Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Council at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, advocating for Veteran-centered improvements in mental health care and access.

Named one of the 2025 Amazing Women of Rich Township, Melissa continues to empower women Veterans to lead with confidence and thrive in life after service.

### **Nicole Mandeville, U.S. Army**

Nicole Mandeville, a member of Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, is a proud United States Army veteran and executive public servant whose leadership reflects discipline, integrity, and steady resolve.



She serves as Deputy Chief Procurement Officer for Business Enterprise Development within the Office of the Chief Procurement Officer for Cook County, Illinois, where she advances equitable access to government contracting opportunities and strengthens systems that drive economic impact.

Formed by her military service, Nicole brings mission clarity, accountability, and principled decision-making to programs supporting small businesses, minority- and women-owned firms, veteran-owned businesses, and businesses owned by individuals with disabilities.

She is recognized for modernizing procurement frameworks, reinforcing compliance and transparency, and ensuring that public investment expands opportunity across communities.

Nicole views leadership as both responsibility and refinement. Her professional journey reflects disciplined growth, thoughtful preparation, and the courage to evolve. She holds high standards, leads with measured confidence, and builds structures designed to endure beyond her tenure — understanding that true impact is sustained through consistency and conviction. She remains committed to ensuring women veterans and public servants are seen, prepared, and positioned to lead.

## ***Nancy O'Connell, U.S. Air Force***

Nancy O'Connell, a member of Olney Post 4226, graduated high school in 1975 and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in December 1977, serving initially as a farm tractor driver on the flight line.

She went on to drive tractor trailers through Tokyo, Japan and many locations in Korea. Realizing the limited career field, she cross trained into the weather career field upon leaving Japan. She went to observer's school, then to forecaster's school at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois.

After several forecasting positions, she was assigned to the Data Administration office. This assignment culminated in two years of work on the Department of Defense-wide group, writing of the first-ever weather dictionary for the Department of Defense.

Her security clearances made her a prime choice for a special duty assignment to the F-117A Stealth Fighter unit. This duty later took her to Saudi Arabia for Desert Shield/Desert Storm for eight months. Her group was lauded for their precise forecasts for the area of responsibility. She retired in 1999 and then "retired" to Florida in 2001. She began working in various real estate positions over the next fifteen years. In 2017 she moved back to Olney. In 2018 she was asked to join her local VFW and was soon elected to Post Quartermaster, and later Post Commander.

Nancy has gone on to keep her post active, mentoring several members in the duties of Quartermaster as well as Commander. When it seemed the only answer was to decrease the number of hours the post was open, Nancy argued that "We need to be here to serve veterans and to do that our



post must be open!" The answer is not to do less, but to find ways to make more money and keep the doors open. She alone found ways to bring the public in, and the post continues to thrive today. The post has won several awards due to her hard work, focus on the details, and dedication to the mission.

Nancy continues to also serve at the VFW District level as District Adjutant. She has found herself mentoring many members of the eleven posts within her district including assisting many of the older members wrestling with the newer technologies expected of them. Members of posts outside her district reach out to for her assistance as well. Nancy makes time to assist them as well.

## ***Jen Solum, U.S. Air Force***

Jennifer Solum is a United States Air Force veteran, Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County (VACWC), the first female President of the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions, and a member of Judd Kendall VFW Post



3873 in Naperville. She served on active duty as an Aircraft Structural Maintenance Specialist and later in the Air Force Reserve as a Certified Surgical Technologist. Her military service included deployments to Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Following her military service, Jennifer began her career with VACWC as a work-study participant. She was subsequently hired

as a Veterans Service Officer and, through demonstrated leadership and commitment to serving veterans, advanced to Assistant Superintendent and ultimately to Superintendent.

Prior to joining VACWC, she worked as a Certified Surgical Technologist at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital and Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital, and served as Adjunct Faculty for the Surgical Technology Program at the College of DuPage.

Today, she provides strategic leadership and operational oversight for county-wide veteran service programs, ensuring regulatory compliance, fiscal responsibility, and high-quality service delivery. Jennifer is the proud mother of her 25-year-old daughter, Olyvia. During her deployment to Afghanistan, she met her husband, Stephen, who continues to serve in the U.S. Army and recently returned from deployment to Iraq.

Her career and personal life reflect a steadfast commitment to service, family, leadership, and expanding access to care for those who have served.

## ***Shirley Spruiel, U.S. Army***

Shirley Spruiel, a member of Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, began her military career on Aug. 1, 1994, joining the U.S. Army Reserves after graduating from Wilberforce University.

Inspired by her family's military legacy and her passion for medicine, she entered service as a Specialist committed to disciplined, purposeful care. After completing basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and medical training at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, as a combat medic and surgical technician, she was assigned to the 801st Combat Support Hospital and later advanced to a Forward Surgical Team.

Between 2007 and 2013, Shirley deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with the 932nd Forward Surgical Team. As a surgical technician, team leader, and combat medic, she performed life-saving procedures under combat conditions, treating severe blast injuries, gunshot wounds, and burns. She supported elite units such as the 82nd Airborne Division and Army Rangers, working in remote, high-risk environments, often enduring extreme shortages and harsh terrain. Despite months without running water and constant danger, she maintained operational readiness and an unwavering focus on patient care.

She later completed trauma training at Jackson Memorial Hospital, where she overcame discrimination through demonstrated excellence, embodying her motto: "I don't brag about the



extensive experience I have. I will show you."

Diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2022, Shirley was medically retired in 2025 with an honorable discharge. Now a cancer survivor and leader at Private Cathay Williams Combat Women and Victory Place, she continues to serve veterans with resilience, humility, and purpose.

## ***Aretha Spurlock, U.S. Army***

Aretha Spurlock, Commander of Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, is a retired U.S. Army veteran, senior federal acquisition professional, and distinguished veterans' advocate whose career reflects sustained excellence in service and leadership.

She honorably served 20 years in the United States Army in technically demanding medical and laboratory roles, supporting mission-critical healthcare and research operations at installations in the United States, Germany, and Korea.

Known for her professionalism, discipline, and resilience, Aretha



consistently upheld the highest standards of accountability and operational effectiveness, retiring in 2005.

Following military service, Commander Spurlock continued her commitment to public service through civilian leadership roles in healthcare systems and federal contracting. She supported VA hospitals, Native American reservations, correctional facilities, and government agencies before advancing into federal acquisition, where she currently serves as a Lead Contract Specialist with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

A graduate of the University of Maryland with an MBA and a Master's in Contract Management, she has also demonstrated

exemplary veterans' leadership through the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Since joining in 2012, she has served five years as Quartermaster and, in 2023, made history as the first female Commander of VFW Post 311.

As Commander, she has supported the Mississippi flood victims, supplied food and clothing to local communities, awarded eight scholarships to high school seniors, sponsored Christmas toy giveaways to local children and children residing at the VFW's National Home for Homeless children. Commander Spurlock's career embodies integrity, service under pressure, and an enduring commitment to veterans, government excellence, and community advancement.

### ***Amiee Wagoner, U.S. Army***

Amiee Wagoner, a member of New Athens Post 7710 in New Athens, Illinois, proudly served in the Army National Guard from 1989 to 1996 before transitioning to Active Duty from 1996 to 1999.

During this time, she completed two tours in Korea from 1996 to 1998, demonstrating unwavering dedication, resilience, and commitment to mission and country.

Continuing a lifelong devotion to supporting fellow service members, Amiee now serves as the District 14 Commander for the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars.

In addition, she holds the role of Assistant Women Veterans Chair for the Department of Illinois VFW, advocating for visibility, equity, and support for women who have served. Amiee is currently working on the second annual Women's Veterans Resource Fair in Southern Illinois.

Beyond the VFW, Amiee is the Adjutant for Chapter 24 of the Disabled American Veterans, Department of Illinois, where she helps ensure veterans receive the benefits, resources, and recognition they have earned. She is also a



certified Veterans Service Officer with the DAV as well as being a dedicated driver for the DAV Transportation Network. Amiee also serves on the Executive Board of the Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County, working collaboratively to strengthen services and improve the quality of life for veterans across the region.

With decades of service — both in uniform and in the community — Amiee continues to embody leadership, integrity, and a steadfast commitment to those who have worn the nation's uniform.

## Shannon Yount, U.S. Marine Corps

Shannon Yount, a member of Russell E. Dunham Post 1308, Alton, currently serves as the Program Specialist for the Military and Veterans Rights Bureau within the Office of the Illinois Attorney General.



Her primary responsibilities are to coordinate and implement programs and projects that align with the Office's objective to ensure that veterans, service members, and their family members' rights are protected.

In previous roles, Shannon proudly served in the United States Marine Corps for more than seven years as a combat correspondent, and held positions including area guardsman, sexual assault victim advocate, and suicide prevention training non-commissioned officer.

During her military career, she deployed to Afghanistan and supported Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 2014, she transitioned from the military and moved to Illinois with her family, where she began her career in public service as a civilian.

While completing her associate degree at Lewis and Clark Community College, Shannon participated in a work-study program under the supervision of an Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Service Officer. This was her first exposure to serving and advocating for veterans. In 2015, she continued to serve veterans as a veteran constituent representative for a congressional office.

As a veteran constituent representative, she was a liaison between those constituents and the various agencies that provided services to them. Her continued exposure to the veteran community sparked a passion to advocate for those who do not have a voice.

In 2018, Shannon joined the Office of the Illinois Attorney General as a veteran's advocate. Her responsibilities included staffing the Military and Veterans Rights Helpline, case management and community outreach.

Shannon is a proud alumna of the University of Missouri Saint Louis and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mass communication. She is also the vice chair of the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council.

Currently, Shannon lives in the Village of Godfrey, with her husband and four children.

## VA Volunteer Awards

Receiving awards at the VA St. Louis Health Care Volunteer Awards banquet were Emma Sue Wienhoff, Jefferson Barracks Lifetime Director Award; Ed Weinhoff, Jefferson Barracks 1,750 Hour Award pin; Clyde Rowold, Jefferson Barracks 100 hour pin and Kathy Rowold, Jefferson Barracks 300 hour pin.





Collinsville VFW membership with King Kahok. (Photo by Richard Lawrence)

## No Joke: After 50 Years, King Kahok Returns Home to Collinsville VFW

*Story by Richard Lawrence and Tara Skipper*

What began as a decades-old mystery – and a bit of VFW lore – has officially come full circle.

On March 31, 2026, members of Collinsville VFW Post 5691 traveled to Lansing, Michigan to recover “King Kahok,” a 6-foot-tall statue and longtime symbol of the post that had been missing since 1977. The statue was originally taken by Lansing VFW Post 701 as part of a friendly rivalry between posts – reportedly in response to an earlier, unknown item taken by Collinsville VFW World War II veterans.

The story resurfaced months ago when Collinsville member

Ted Jackson discovered an old note reading: “We have your Indian,” signed by Post 701. After confirming its authenticity with Lansing member Joan, Jackson asked Alonzo “Skip” Skipper to reach out. Skip connected with Jerry Mejia, Quartermaster of Post 701, and together they coordinated the return of King Kahok after nearly five decades.

On the morning of March 31, Joe Glass, Alonzo “Skip” Skipper, and Tara Skipper left Collinsville at 7:00 a.m. for Lansing. The journey proved eventful, as severe weather – including heavy rain and hail – along with a malfunctioning driver-side windshield wiper, threatened to delay the mission. After roadside repairs and a stop for parts, the team pressed on and successfully

completed the recovery, returning to Collinsville the same day with King Kahok safely in their possession.

In a show of appreciation and camaraderie, the Collinsville team presented Lansing VFW Post 701 with a gift basket representing their hometown. Contributions included Kahok Nation shirts from Collinsville High School, horseradish products from Keller Farms – honoring Collinsville as the Horseradish Capital of the World – and festival memorabilia, local items, and a community print provided by the Collinsville Chamber of Commerce. Souvenirs celebrating the city’s iconic World’s Largest Catsup Bottle were also included.

On April 1, 2026 – fittingly,

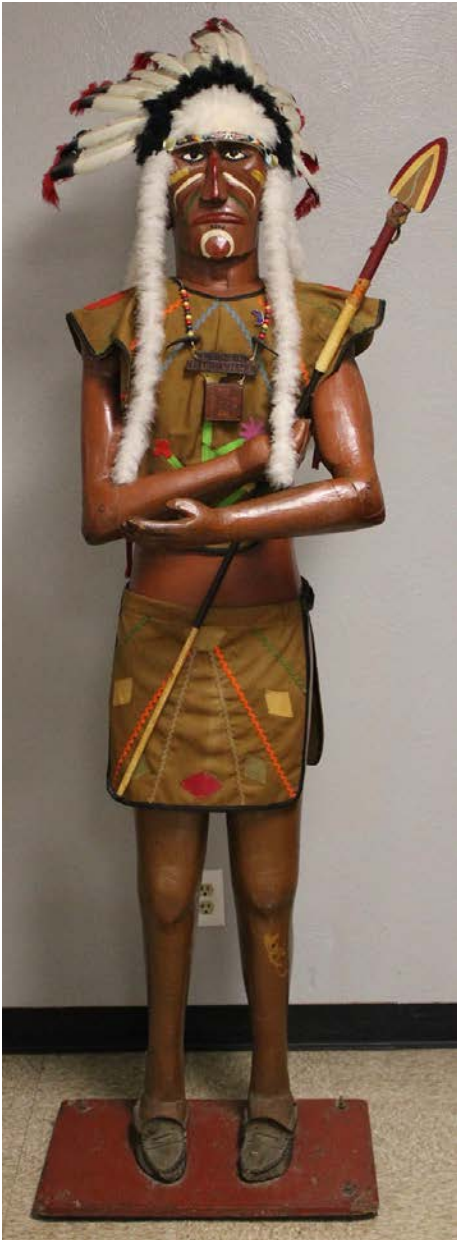
April Fool's Day – King Kahok was quietly returned to Collinsville VFW Post 5691 and unveiled to membership. The moment marked the end of a 50-year journey and the

continuation of a story rooted in friendship, humor, and the enduring bonds of the VFW.

While the original veterans involved are no longer here to witness the return, their legacy

lives on through the fellowship and shared history carried forward by today's members.

What began as a prank has become a piece of history – and now, King Kahok is finally home.



Clockwise - King Kahok after being presented to the membership and auxiliary. (Photo by Richard Lawrence)

Commander Joe Glass, VFW Post 5691, Collinsville, presents a basket to Commander Allen Bachelder, VFW Post 701, Lansing, Michigan. (Photo by Tara Skipper)

From left, Alonzo "Skip" Skipper, Allen Bachelder, Joe Glass, Tara Skipper, Joan Mejia, and Jerry Mejia. (Photo by Sophia)





# 10 Rules for Email Etiquette

## 1. Use a clear, professional subject line

Show your recipient clearly what the email will cover.

## 2. Proofread every email you send

Make sure there are no grammatical or professional errors. Have you spelt the recipient's name correctly? Are there spelling errors?

## 3. Write your email before entering the recipient email address

It is always best practice to write the contents of your email first in case you accidentally send the message too early.

## 4. Double check you have the correct recipient

There is nothing worse than sending an email to the wrong person or a confidential document to the wrong place.

## 5. Ensure you CC all relevant recipients

It is unprofessional to leave out a colleague from a relevant email chain. Be mindful of who should be informed about a given matter and respect that.

## 6. You don't always have to "reply all"

Think about who needs to read your response; no one wants to read multiple email chains from 20

people that simply says "received" or "OK". You always have the option to reply just to the sender if you want to.

## 7. Reply to your emails

Replying to an email is good etiquette, especially if the sender is expecting a response. Acknowledging you received the email but will get back to the sender at a later time is a professional alternative to ignoring or avoiding certain emails.

## 8. Include a signature block

If your recipient doesn't know anything about you, they may be skeptical of the authenticity of your email. It is professional to include your full name, title, and your contact number.

## 9. Use the appropriate level of formality

For instance, begin with "Dear \_\_\_\_\_", use "please" and "thank you" where necessary, and always end your email with the appropriate phrase, "Kind regards", "Thank you", "Sincerely" and so on.

## 10. Keep emails brief and to the point

No one wants to read an enormous chunk of text. You can always follow up on the matter later or suggest they give you a call if they have any queries or concerns.



Fisher Weeks VFW Post 1299, Edwardsville, recognized the outstanding ROTC Cadets from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) ROTC at the annual awards program. Pictured from left to right; MSIV Cadet Gavynn Baer, MSIII Cadet Aireana Gavere, MSII Cadet Marissa Meier, MSI Cadet Mary Lyon, and Post 1299 Commander Tim Schultheis.

# Candidates seeking offices at 107th State Convention

(as reported to State Headquarters)

This list is not inclusive of all who may seek elected offices at the State Convention. Nominations for elected office will be opened Friday, June 12 during the afternoon business session. Nominations will be reopened and elections will be held during the business session, Saturday, June 13. Any member in good standing is eligible to seek office.

**Elect**  
**Rob Bailey**  
State Commander

.....

**Elect**  
**Ryan Higginbotham**  
State Senior Vice Commander

.....

**Elect**  
**Doug Jameson**  
State Junior Vice Commander

**Elect**  
**John McGlynn**  
State Junior Vice Commander

.....

**Elect**  
**Eric Morales**  
State Junior Vice Commander

.....

**Re-Elect**  
**Scott Swinford**  
State Quartermaster

**Re-Elect**  
**Jayson Hoffman**  
State Judge Advocate

.....

**Elect**  
**Damon Arnold**  
State Surgeon

.....

**Re-Elect**  
**Gary Holmes**  
State Chaplain

# 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



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.

Officer in 1999, said Kash was an awesome Soldier.

"He never shied away from 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



**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.**

forgotten what he meant to them and always share stories of their brother with their own children.

“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,



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

Veterans Service Organizations like the VFW are often the heart of the community.

“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.”

## Edward Jones Supports Collinsville VFW Post 5691 Membership Program

During a recent monthly meeting at Collinsville VFW Post 5691, members were honored to welcome special guests Jeff Stark and Katie Schuetz, representing local Edward Jones advisors from the Collinsville and Maryville areas.

As part of their continued support for veterans, Stark and Schuetz presented a generous \$700 donation to the Post’s Membership Program. These funds will be used to help purchase life memberships for local Korean and Vietnam War veterans, ensuring their continued connection and recognition within the VFW community.

Collinsville Post 5691 extends its sincere appreciation to Edward Jones and its local advisors for their commitment to supporting those who have served.

Special thanks for their donations: Katie Schuetz, Jeff Stark, Scott Combs, Kyle Webster,

Kyle Stein, Chris Rydgig, Nathan Spudrich, Richard Lawrence, VFW Post 5691.



**VFW Commander Joe Glass (left) with Edward Jones representatives Jeff Stark and Katie Schuetz presenting a \$700 donation.**

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

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

Col. Michael R. Kowalski of Elmhurst, Illinois, a member of Horace F. Ortt Post 540 in Dixon, assumed command of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) from Col. Seth Hible of Winfield, Illinois, during a change of command ceremony in Urbana, Aug. 17.

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

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

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

"Today, I take off my blue (Infantry) cord which I have worn for over 40 years," Hible said. "We need change. We need to

move forward. ... Continue what we started and more importantly evolve into the next thing."

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

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

With more than 3,500 Soldiers, the 33rd IBCT is the largest brigade

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

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

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



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

# Collinsville VFW Hosts 2nd Annual Women Veterans Resource Fair

**Story and Photos by  
Richard Lawrence, VFW Post 5691**

The 2nd Annual Women Veterans Resource Fair was held at Collinsville VFW Post 5691 in recognition of Women's History Month, March 29.

Chaired by Amiee Waggoner, Illinois Department Assistant Women Veterans Chairwoman, the event brought together a strong and supportive community focused on honoring and empowering women who have served.

With more than 75 attendees and approximately 20 vendors, the fair demonstrated the growing connection and support within the veteran community.

## Honoring Our Veterans

This year's event carried special significance as it coincided with National Vietnam War Veterans Day. A moment was taken to honor the courage and sacrifice of the 11,000 women who served in Vietnam, including the eight who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

We extend a heartfelt "Welcome Home" to all veterans across every branch of service.

## Opening Ceremony

The event began with a respectful and patriotic opening ceremony.

## Pledge of Allegiance:

Led by Tara Skipper, Auxiliary Department of Illinois Patriotic Instructor

**Tara Skipper (not pictured), Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Patriotic Instructor, leads the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance.**

## Resource Fair & Community Engagement

Following the ceremony, attendees connected with a wide range of organizations dedicated to supporting women veterans.

## Participating Organizations

The event featured a strong presence from federal, state, and local agencies, including:

- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
  - VA Women's Health Care
  - Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
  - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
  - Illinois Attorney General's Office
  - And approximately 20 supporting vendors
- Community Impact  
The resource fair created meaningful opportunities for



**Amiee Waggoner, Department of Illinois VFW Assistant Women Veterans Chairwoman, welcomes everyone to the resource fair.**



connection, education, and support – bringing together veterans and organizations committed to serving those who served.

#### Acknowledgments

This event was made possible through the generous support and donations of:

- Collinsville VFW Post 5691
- Belleville VFW Post 4183

#### Closing Message

The success of the 2nd Annual Women Veterans Resource Fair highlights the importance of continued outreach, recognition, and support for women veterans. Together, we honor their service and strengthen the bonds that unite us.



Evamarie Duff, District 4 Commander, at the VFW information table.



One of the many vendors at the Women Veterans Resource Fair.



Approximately 20 vendor booths were set up at the Women Veterans Resource Fair.



Staff from the Department of Veterans Affairs was on hand to answer questions about resources for women veterans at the resource fair.



The resource fair created opportunities to connect women veterans to resources in Illinois.

# Albaugh Promoted to First Sergeant for Mattoon Recruiting Company

The Mattoon, Illinois-based Company L “Locomotives” of the Illinois Army National Guard’s Recruiting and Retention Battalion (RRB), has a new conductor at the helm, ready to lead them down the track to success as the unit’s first sergeant.

Newly promoted 1st Sgt. Keith Albaugh, a member of Rochester VFW Post 11463, Rochester, received his new rank during a ceremony April 10 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

“This ceremony is about putting the right leader in the right position at the right time,” said Lt. Col. Lance Frail, Commander, Recruiting and Retention Battalion. “The Locomotives have one heck of a conductor who will lead them down the track.”

Frail said the unanimous reaction received by the audience at RRB’s recent state training meeting was an indication the decision by RRB’s command team made the right decision.

“The reaction was not by accident,” Frail said. “It is a testament about who you are, the leader you are and the noncommissioned officer you are.”

Frail said RRB’s command team has the utmost faith in Albaugh’s ability to accomplish the mission.

“We have the utmost confidence in your ability to serve in this role,” he said. “We have all the faith in your leadership.”

Albaugh said his faith and mantra has led him to this moment.

“My mantra is Isaiah, Chapter 6, Verse 80. Here I am, send me,” he said. “It is a reminder to be ready to serve, to step forward when called, and I’ll continue to carry that with me into this next role.”

Albaugh thanked his family, wife, Dr. Jenna Albaugh, and sons, Liam and Owen.

“This achievement is as much yours as it is mine,” he said. “Thank you, Jenna, for being my rock through the long days, missed moments, and all the sacrifices that came with our life. Your strength, resiliency, and support make it possible for me to serve the way I do. Boys, I hope some day you will understand when I say to you that you are my reason. Everything I do is to hopefully be a good example to you.”

Albaugh also thanked the RRB leadership for placing their trust in him to serve as Company L’s first sergeant. He also thanked the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) he has served with throughout his 26 years of military service to mold and shape him into the Soldier he is today.

Albaugh enlisted as an infantry Soldier in 2000,



**Dr. Jenna Albaugh, and sons, Liam and Owen, the family of newly promoted 1st Sgt. Keith Albaugh, put new rank on his uniform during a ceremony April 10 at the Illinois Military Academy at Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Albaugh, who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2000, was recently selected to serve as the first sergeant for the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion Company L.**

Albaugh served on active duty in Alaska before transitioning into the Illinois Army National Guard in 2004, serving in Company A, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment before moving to Company B, 2/130th INF.

His first full-time position was as a supply technician in the logistics directorate, while continuing to serve with Company B as a traditional member of the Illinois National Guard.

In 2019, Albaugh became a recruiter with Company K, RRB, before transitioning to Headquarters, RRB in 2022 to become the interstate transfer and interservice recruiting NCO.

For the past three years, Albaugh has served as the Waivers and Operations NCO in RRB.

Albaugh said the promotion isn’t about rank, it’s about the responsibility he has to the Soldiers of Company L and their families.

"I have a responsibility to each of you, to be present, accountable and set the example every day," he said. "It's about fairness, consistency, and leadership that will put you and your families first without compromising our mission. Leadership is an action, not a position."

The RRB's new senior enlisted leader, Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Miller said under Albaugh's leadership, the waivers process has been improved.

"During Sergeant Albaugh's 30 months as a recruiter, he had 33 enlistments, with one loss," Miller said. "Since starting in waivers, he has worked 1,813 waivers. In fiscal year 2025, 70 percent of enlistments went through his office. To date, nearly 60 percent of the enlistment for this fiscal year has gone through his office."

"Leadership is built on what we be, what you know, and what you do," Miller said. "First Sergeant Albaugh is ready to lead from the front."



**Newly promoted 1st Sgt. Keith Albaugh thanks family and fellow Soldiers for their support and guidance throughout his military service.**



## **Post 4763 Honors Vietnam Veterans**

Chatham-Auburn Memorial Post 4763 hosted their annual Vietnam Veteran Appreciation Dinner on March 28. Speakers were Freddy Rocha and Kimberly Yantis. Chaplain Les Morgan.





## ***Honoring the Journey: Building Connection, Elevating Women Veterans, and Creating What Comes Next***

***By Nekohl Johnson  
Department of Illinois VFW  
Women Veterans Chairperson***

Serving as the Department of Illinois VFW Women's Chairperson from 2025 to 2026 has been one of the most meaningful honors of my veteran service journey. As I prepare to pass the torch, I do so with gratitude and with a clear understanding that this work must continue beyond any one term.

From the beginning, my mission was to ensure women veterans are seen, heard, and valued. This year, that mission took shape through one central focus, which is connection across Illinois and throughout the VFW community.

Through conversations, shared spaces, and consistent engagement, my goal was to ensure that no woman veteran felt invisible or alone.

Visibility became a priority. Too often, women veterans serve quietly. I worked to help change that by creating opportunities for recognition and presence. In partnership with Chicago Veterans, I helped promote a group experience for women veterans at a Chicago Bulls game, creating space for connection and camaraderie. I also supported nominations for the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Top 25 Women Veteran Leaders for 2026, ensuring VFW Women Veteran Leaders were represented

among those recognized for their leadership.

In addition, I submitted profiles of VFW Women Veterans to the Chicago Sky organization for in-game recognition, helping to elevate their stories to broader audiences. To further amplify visibility, I created a Veterans Day video campaign honoring both women veterans and spouses; recognizing not only service, but the families who stand alongside that service.

This year also included meaningful moments of reflection and progress. I had the honor of highlighting the legacy of Ruth E. Lewis Marshall of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion and engaging with Senator



Tammy Duckworth, whose leadership continues to inspire. I also met Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore, the first female Commander-in-Chief of the VFW, and connected with National Women Veterans Chairperson Patsy Schreiber. These moments reflected a powerful truth: women are not only part of this organization – we are helping lead its future.

As important as the work of this year has been, what comes next matters just as much.

As my term concludes, I am focused on sustainability and leadership development. One of the most important steps forward is the creation of a Women Veterans team structure designed to support the next Chairperson and expand engagement across Illinois. This structure allows women to serve in areas aligned with their strengths and interests, while building leadership across the Department.

The structure includes:  
Women’s Outreach - Amiee





Wagoner

Legislative Action – Staci Boyer

Media & Campaigns – Nekohl

Johnson

Event Planning – Aretha

Spurlock

Honor & Recognition –

Jennifer Glenn

This is more than a transition plan; it is a foundation. A way to ensure that the work continues, grows, and reaches more women veterans across our state.

I also supported a legislative awareness initiative encouraging women veterans to stay informed and engaged, including an effort to reach 250 voices in recognition of America’s 250th birthday.

I am grateful to Department Commander Eugene Blackwell for his trust and leadership, which made this work possible. His support created space not only for me to serve, but for other women veterans to step forward.

Leadership is not about what you build during your time, it is about what continues after you are gone.

If I leave anything behind, I hope it is this: women veterans standing together, supporting one another, and knowing without question that they belong.



# Post 3480 Delivers Food to Community

On March 9 and March 12, Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480 Senior Vice Commander Janese Jordan and Quartermaster Jeannen Flemings delivered food to residents in the East Saint Louis area. The residents expressed great appreciation for these acts of service.



# Post 3480 Honors Law Enforcement Officer

Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 and its Auxiliary are proud to announce Lt. D'Angelo Franklin has been nominated for Law Enforcement Officer of the Year for 2025-26.

Commander Valerie Young presented Lt. Franklin with a token of appreciation for his dedication on April 17.



# FROM THE ASSISTANT SURGEON

## High Blood Pressure

By Col. Chev. Damon T. Arnold, MD (USARNG-Ret.)

*Disclaimer: This information is for educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a health care professional before starting on any new medication.*

**High Blood Pressure** (aka, Hypertension [HTN]) is a leading, modifiable risk factor for all-cause mortality and without treatment the risk increases for:

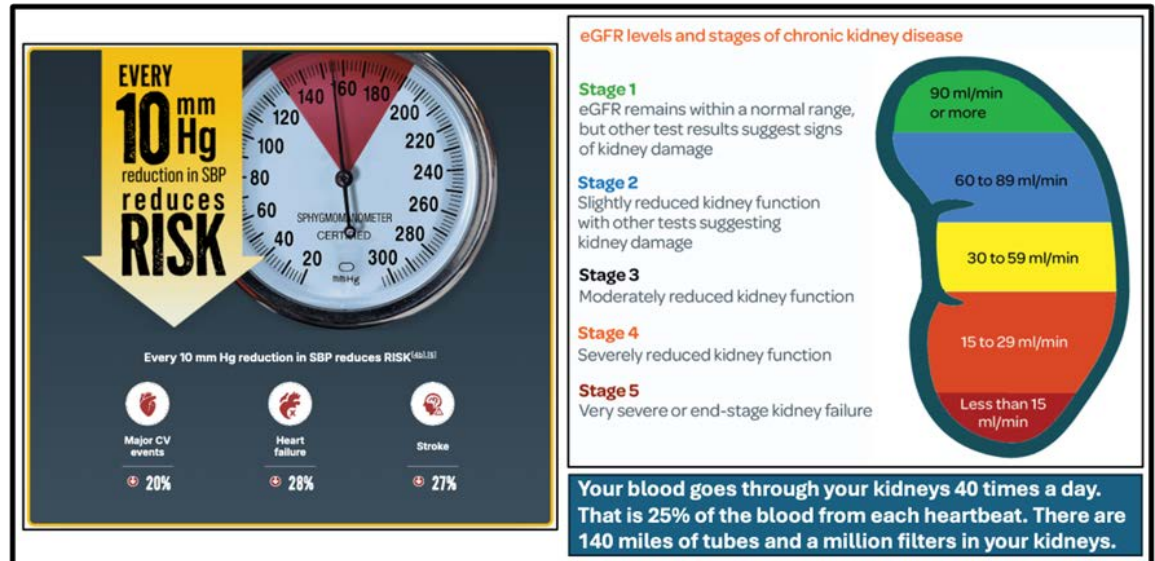
- Heart Disease (e.g., heart attack: 1.8 times as likely as the general population),
- Chronic Kidney Disease (e.g., End Stage Kidney Disease (ESKD): times as likely as the general population),
- Transient Ischemic Attacks (TIA) 2.5 and Stroke (2.2 times as likely as the general population).

HTN increases all cause of mortality by 1.3 times and is a leading modifiable risk factor for dementia. About 50% of US adults taking two or more antihypertensive medications have hard to control HTN. There are 5 stages of kidney disease and as a person moves from Stage 1 to Stage 5 there is progressively more damage to the kidneys.

Urine and blood tests are necessary to detect kidney disease.

To find out more about managing kidney disease please refer to the websites below:

Kidney Fund [www.KidneyFund.org/](http://www.KidneyFund.org/)  
KnowYourKidneys



National Kidney Foundation at <https://www.kidney.org>.

New American Heart Association Guidelines lower the threshold for starting treatment for high blood pressure:

- Stage 1 (130-139/80-89 mm Hg): Lifestyle modification recommended for all in this category. Medication is initiated if 10-year CVD risk is > 7.5% or if BP stays high after 3-6 months of lifestyle changes.

- Stage 2 (>140/90 mm Hg): Immediate lifestyle modification and prompt initiation of two first-line agents, preferably in a single-pill, fixed-dose combination.

For Clinicians: Use the PREVENT equations for adults\* ages 30-79 without known Cardiovascular Disease (CVD). Do not use the PREVENT equations for adults with known CVD, evidence of severe subclinical CVD (e.g., left ventricular ejection fraction <40%, coronary artery calcium ≥300), positive genetic testing for pathogenic variants or for an

inherited cardiovascular condition, end-stage kidney disease, or a limited life expectancy (<1 year).

Specific Populations: For adults with diabetes and hypertension, ACE inhibitors or ARB are recommended for those with chronic kidney disease (CKD) (eGFR < 60 mL/min/1.73 m<sup>2</sup> or albuminuria).

**Blood Pressure Measurement:** Caution against relying on consumer-grade “cuffless” smartwatches for diagnostic decisions; validated cuff-based monitors are preferred. Consult with your provider if you have a medical or surgical contraindication for using a blood pressure cuff.

### Measuring Blood Pressure:

For accurate medical provider in-office or home blood pressure readings, sit quietly for 5 minutes with back supported, feet flat, legs uncrossed, and arm resting at heart level.

Use a validated, properly fitted cuff on bare skin [i.e., no shirt

sleeve] one inch above elbow bend.

Avoid using caffeine, exercising, and smoking for 30 minutes prior to measuring your blood pressure.

Use the rest room before measuring your blood pressure as a full urinary bladder can temporarily raise blood pressure. The table below indicates correct blood pressure cuff sizes tailored to each individual's needs.

Take two readings 1 minute apart, morning and evening, recording results and report the results to your provider.

#### Treating Allergies and High Blood Pressure

Generally safe allergy medicines for high blood pressure include non-drowsy antihistamines like Loratadine (Claritin), Fexofenadine (Allegra), Cetirizine (Zyrtec), and nasal sprays such as Fluticasone (Flonase).

Generally avoid products with "-D" (e.g., Claritin-D, Allegra-D, Zyrtec-D), which contain decongestants like pseudoephedrine that can constrict blood vessels and increase blood pressure; also avoid Phenylephrine.

Generally safe allergy medicines for those having high blood pressure include non-drowsy

Arm Circumference in centimeters	Recommended Cuff Size (width X length) (cm)
22 - 26 Adult Cuff (Small)	12 X 22
27 - 34 Adult cuff (Regular)	16 X 30
35 - 44 Adult Cuff (Large)	16 X 36
45 - 52 Adult Cuff (Thigh)	16 X 42

Antihistamines - these do not typically affect blood pressure: Loratadine (Claritin), Cetirizine (Zyrtec), Fexofenadine (Allegra), and Levocetirizine (Xyzal).

Nasal Sprays (Steroid & Saline): These act locally in the nose, reducing congestion and inflammation without impacting systemic blood pressure: Fluticasone (Flonase), Triamcinolone (Nasacort), and Budesonide (Rhinocort). Saline rinses may also be effective.

Other Options: Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) is generally safe but causes drowsiness. Eye drops like Ketotifen (Zaditor) and Olopatadine (Pataday) are generally safe.

Always read the ingredients label listing for decongestants and other medications that may bare warning labels about high blood pressure.

Make sure to have follow-up

visits with your doctor or health care provider to monitor your blood pressure and general health over time.

Try non-drug remedies such as using saline nasal spray or washes to flush out allergens - consult with provider on their proper use.

Again, this information is for educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a health care professional before starting on a new medication. It is highly recommended that you have routine, regularly scheduled medical care which can prevent medical emergencies and a premature death. Ask your provider questions about your health maintenance - it is YOUR body. In the end it is not just about you, but your family, comrades, and friends that depend on your remaining healthy. God speed and a wish for your excellent health and a long life Comrades!

## VFW Announces 2026 National Youth Scholarship Winners

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) proudly named the national winners of its 2025-2026 Voice of Democracy® and Patriot's Pen® youth scholarship competitions as it presented more than \$176,000 in national scholarships and awards, April 11.

For the first time in two decades, the national winners were announced at a special 79th annual Parade of Winners ceremony at the historic Union League of Philadelphia during the winners' trip to Founding Forward's Spirit of America Youth Leadership

experience at Valley Forge. The trip, awarded to every VFW Department (state) winner, was sponsored by Twisted X.

VFW Jr. Vice Commander Glenn Umberger, Jr. and VFW Auxiliary President Lois Callahan were joined by Twisted X Senior Director of Sales Clayton Smith to announce this year's winners.

Department of Illinois Voice of Democracy winner, Victoria Negrete, from Midlothian, was awarded the \$1,000 Department of Florida John M. "Jack" Carney Scholarship.

Negrete, the District 16 champion, was sponsored by Midlothian Memorial Post 2580 and Auxiliary of Midlothian.

The VFW and Auxiliary also presented the Patriot's Pen awards.

The Department of Illinois Patriot's Pen winner, Michael Sieniawski, placed second nationally and was awarded \$4,000.

Sieniawski, the District 4 Patriot's Pen champion, was sponsored by VFW Post 1337 located in Mount Prospect.

# Post 1299 Honors Edwardsville First Responders

Fisher Weeks Post 1299, Edwardsville, recognized two Edwardsville first responders for their dedication to duty.

VFW Adjutant Larry Miller, Post 1299 Commander Tim Schultheis and VFW member Lionel Hawk attended a City Council meeting to honor Edwardsville Police Officer Wesley Nolden and Firefighter/Paramedic Chris Hartsoe of the Edwardsville Fire Department.

Nolden was recognized as a “steady professional

and go-to officer for complex calls and follow-up.” The certificate of appreciation was given “in grateful recognition of unyielding adherence to highest details and ideals of law enforcement.”

Hartsoe was awarded a national emergency medical technician public service citation, and recognized as a “top-tier paramedic in our region” who has “performed admirably in very difficult circumstances.”



From left, VFW member Lionel Hawk, VFW Adjutant Larry Miller, Officer Wesley Nolden, Firefighter/Paramedic Chris Hartsoe, VFW Post 1299 Commander Tim Schultheis and Mayor Art Risavy.



Edwardsville Fire Department staff attended Tuesday's City Council meeting in support of Firefighter/Paramedic Chris Hartsoe and newly promoted Lt. Cole Schrage.



Edwardsville Police Department staff attended Tuesday's meeting in support of Officer Wesley Nolden.

## Posts Celebrate Milestone Charter Anniversaries

The following Posts will celebrate major milestone charter anniversaries in May and June.

### 105 years - chartered 1921

La Fore Lock Post 755, Springfield, June 30

### 95 years - chartered 1931

Du Page Memorial Post 2164, Wheaton, June 10

Willard L. Velie Jr. Post 2153, Moline, June 12

### 85 years - chartered 1941

General Hill Post 3601, Paris, May 23

### 80 years - chartered 1946

Mark White Square Post 6870, Chicago, May 5

Jackson County Post 7190, Murphysboro, May 12

Panama Post 6628, Panama, May 19

Addison Post 7446, Addison, May 25

Brotherton-Keller Post 6289, Gibson City, May 27

L. Percy Tucker Post 6026, El Paso, June 4

Two Rivers Post 7535, Momence, June 7

Earl W. Homer Mem. Post 7678, Cottage Hills, June 16

New Athens Post 7710, New Athens, June 18

SSG Henry A. Huber Post 7682, Mascoutah, June 22

# 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, a member of Horace F. Ortt Post 540 in Dixon, and 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



**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)**

brotherhood unfolded.

A poignant example of this 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.

# Wester Assumes Command of Chemical Battalion

Lt. Col. Matthew Dodsworth relinquished command of the 44th Chemical Battalion to Lt. Col. Chad Wester, a member of Guthrie-Pierce Post 1239 in Beardstown, at Heartland Community College, in Normal, Illinois, Aug. 10.

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

“Serving you as commander has been the privilege of a lifetime, and quite honestly, the highlight of my 27-year

career,” Dodsworth told his Soldiers. “Though I leave this command today, I will forever carry with me the lessons I learned, the memories made and the pride of being on an amazing team that you all have built.”

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

“It is here that I learned the foundational lessons of leadership, teamwork, and the critical importance of our mission,” said Wester. “To return now, entrusted with the responsibility of leading this team is humbling and deeply meaningful to me.”



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

# Footwear Donation to Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County Benefits Veterans at Facility

Commander Valerie Young on behalf of Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 and it's Auxiliary in East St. Louis, donated male shower shoes to the Veterans housed at the Eagles Nest of St. Clair County facility.

Jake Hoftiezer, executive director of the facility, accepted the items.

While there, Young was provided a short tour of their facility. During the tour, Hoftiezer explained how the facility will expand its mission by housing women veterans.



# An Afternoon of Visiting Hospitalized Veterans

Commander Valerie Young had the pleasure of visiting comrade Marvin Stith at the hospital on behalf of the Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 on April 19.

Young reports Stith is in high spirits and is doing well. His medical team expects him to make a full recovery, and he should be discharged in the very near future. They spent a wonderful afternoon together filled with great conversation and laughter.

Young asks all to wish Stith a steady and speedy recover as he prepares to return home.



# Bryant Promoted to Major in Illinois Army National Guard

Capt. Aaron Bryant, a member of Morgan County Post 1379 in Jacksonville, 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



**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.**

guidance, for pushing me, and for trusting me with the responsibilities that have led 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.”

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

Lt. Col. Matthew Kreiter relinquished command of 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade to Lt. Col. Alison Jacobs, a member of Rocehster Post 11463 in Rochester, during a change of command ceremony at Rock Island Arsenal Sept. 7.

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

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



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



## 404th Soldier Receives MSM

Lt. Col. Matthew Brady of Evergreen Park, Illinois, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade operations officer, and a member of Vernois Post 1376 in Mount Vernon, receives the Meritorious Service Medal at Heartland Community College, Normal, Illinois, Aug. 16. The medals were presented by Col. David Helfrich, the Commander of the 404th MEB, in recognition of Brady's support during his tenure as commander.

# 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, a member of Moultrie County Post 6410 in Sullivan, 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



**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.**

Turnbaugh on his promotion.

"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."

# 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 and a member of John H. Kraus Post 454 in Bloomington, previously served as the brigade’s Executive Officer during its most recent deployment supporting Operation Spartan Shield and Operation Inherent Resolve. His extensive



**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)**



**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)**

career includes deployments to both Iraq 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.

# Post 3480 Conducts Poppy Day in East St. Louis

Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 and its Auxiliary conducted a Buddy Poppy Day in East St. Louis, March 28.



# Bloomington Soldier Credits Success to Giant Life Lessons

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

A life member of John H. Kraus Post 454 in Bloomington who has spent the past 32 years serving in the Illinois Army National Guard 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



**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.**

artillery branch in 2003, later branching into the transportation branch.

He has deployed three times for overseas missions. During 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., a member of Scott Air Force Base Post 4183 and 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.



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

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

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, and a member of Lewistown Post 5001 in Lewistown,, 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 know 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



**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.**

build an international coalition, and the modern precision weapons we unveiled during Desert Storm are also tremendous strengths that support our national defense 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



**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.**

said. "I believe the last thing they thought when they joined 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.



**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.**



**Illinois Army National Guard Chaplain (Maj.) Monte Bowers delivers the invocation during the 35th Annual Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony Feb. 28.**

***To Submit Items for the  
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for consideration in the Illi-  
nois VFW News should email  
items to**

**Editor Barbara Wilson at  
barb.wilson2@outlook.com  
Next deadline is June 20**

# 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 humbled to play a small role in replacing the little reminder of



**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.**

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, even with a small memento like an

**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.**



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.**

# Post 3480 Supports St. Joseph Center Eagles Nest with Food Donation

Jeannen Flemings, Quartermaster of Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480 in East St. Louis, donated food items to St. Joseph Center Eagles Nest in East St. Louis on April 2.



# Young Honored for 10 Years of Volunteer Work



Commander Valerie Young, Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 in East St. Louis, is celebrating 10 years of volunteering with Hospice of Southern Illinois. Congratulations on your dedicated service and commitment to our community.



# 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."

**Department of Illinois**  
**107th Annual State Convention**

Tentative Agenda (May be subject to change.)

Crowne Plaza  
3000 South Dirksen Parkway, Springfield, IL 62703

June 11-14, 2026

**Thursday, June 11, 2026**

Dress Code for Training & Council Meeting will be Business Casual (Polos)

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM	District Commander-Elect Training <i>Ruby (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM	Membership Luncheon <i>*Invite Only</i> <i>Plaza A (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	VSO Office <i>Opal Room (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	VFW Registration <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	VFW Sales <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	Vendor Booths <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	Silent Auction <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM	Poppy Displays <i>Capital 6 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM – 3:00 PM	Breakout Sessions <i>Capital 1, 2, &amp; 3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM	Bylaws & Resolutions Meeting <i>Ruby (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
3:00 PM - 4:30 PM	Final 2025-2026 Council Meeting <i>Ruby (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
6:00 PM - 7:00 PM	Memorial Service (Coat & Tie or equivalent.) <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
Hospitality Rooms	<i>Governor, Illinois, Sangamon, &amp; Springfield (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>

**Department of Illinois**  
**107th Annual State Convention**

Tentative Agenda (May be subject to change.)

Crowne Plaza

3000 South Dirksen Parkway, Springfield, IL 62703

June 11-14, 2026

**Friday, June 12, 2026**

Dress Code for Business Session will be Coat & Tie

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Joint Opening Ceremony with Guest Speakers & Special Presentations <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	<i>VSO Office</i> <i>Opal Room (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	VFW Registration <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	Vendor Booths <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	VFW Sales <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	Silent Auction <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 4:00 PM	Poppy Displays <i>Capital 6 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
12:00 PM - 1:15 PM	Past Dist. Commander's Assoc. Luncheon <i>Plaza A (1<sup>st</sup> Floor), cost is \$25.</i>
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM	Breakout Sessions <i>Capital 1, 2, &amp; 3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
1:30 PM - 3:00 PM	Rules of the Convention, Credentials, Legislative. with Guest Speakers & Program Reports <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
3:00 PM - 3:45 PM	1st Nominations for 2026-27 State Officers <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
6:00 PM - 7:30 PM	Patriotic Rally (Bring Post or District Colors) <i>Crowne Plaza Parking Lot *weather permitting</i>
Hospitality Rooms	<i>Governor, Illinois, Sangamon, &amp; Springfield (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>

**Department of Illinois  
107th Annual State Convention**

Tentative Agenda (May be subject to change.)

Crowne Plaza, 3000 S. Dirksen Pkwy., Springfield, IL 62703

**Saturday, June 13, 2026**

Dress Code for Business Session will be Coat & Tie

7:00 AM - 8:00 AM	Prayer Service <i>Plaza C (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 10:30 AM	Guests from Veteran's Groups <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 10:00 AM	VFW Registration <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 12:00 PM	VSO Office <i>Opal Room (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Vendor Booths <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 12:00 PM	VFW Sales <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Silent Auction <i>Plaza H (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)</i>
8:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Poppy Displays <i>Capitol 6 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
10:30 AM - 11:15 AM	Buddy Poppy Report, Ntl. Home Report, Silver March & Other Program Reports <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM	<i>Past State Commander's Luncheon</i> <i>Plaza A (1<sup>st</sup> Floor), cost is \$25.</i>
1:00 PM - 3:00 PM	By-Laws & Resolutions, Credentials, Convention Raffle, 2nd Nominations, & Elections <i>Sapphire/Diamond (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
3:00 PM - 4:00 PM	Joint Installation of 2026-27 State Officers <i>Sapphire, Diamond, Emerald (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor)</i>
6:00 PM	Commander & President's Reception <i>Northenders Post 10302, Cost is \$25.00</i>
Hospitality Rooms	<i>Governor, Illinois, Sangamon, &amp; Springfield (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>

**Sunday, June 14, 2026**

9:00 AM - 9:30 AM	Council of Administration Meeting <i>Capital 6 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)</i>
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# Tentative Schedule

## 102<sup>ND</sup> Annual Department Convention

### Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary

### Department President Diane Ahrens

All VFW Auxiliary meetings at  
Crowne Plaza Hotel, Springfield, IL



#### Thursday, June 11, 2026

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9:00 a.m. Council of Administration

1:00 pm Training Session Auxiliary

12:00 / 3:00 pm Registration of Delegates

3:30 pm Council Cocktail Party  
for Ahrens/Borkgren

6:00 pm Joint Memorial Service

#### Friday, June 12, 2026

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10:00 / 2:00 pm Registration of Delegates

8:00 am VFW & VFW Auxiliary Joint Opening

12:00 pm Practice for Flag & Banner Presentation

12:30 pm Presentation of Flags and Banners

1:00 p.m. VFW Auxiliary Opening Session

Escort of National VFW Auxiliary Representative

Recognition of National Officers and Chairman

Report of Convention Rules Committee

Report of the Resolutions Committee

Presentation of Past Department Presidents

Presentation of 45 Year + Members

Presentation of Blue Star Mothers

Presentation of Fisher House

Presentation of District Presidents,  
Chief of Staff and Deputy Chiefs of Staff

Awarding of District President of the Year

Presentation of Circle of Excellence

Graves Registration Report

Presentation of Gold Star Families

Memorial Service

Registration & Credential Reports

6:00 pm Patriotic Rally

#### Saturday, June 13, 2026

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8:00 am/10:00 am Registration of Delegates

8:00 am Re-open Meeting

Report of the Officers & Chairmen Reports

Presentation of Department Hospital Chairman,  
VAWS Representatives/Deputies

Hospital Awards

Presentation to Operation Sweet Life

Presentation of Department Chairmen

Program Awards

- Veterans & Family Support
- Americanism
- Auxiliary Outreach
- Buddy Poppy/VFW National Home
- Extension & Revitalization
- Historian
- Legislative
- Scholarship
- Youth Activities
- Membership

11:30 am Department President visit to IL. VFW

11:30 am LUNCH BREAK

12:30 pm II. VFW Commander Visit to Auxiliary

1:00 p.m. Presentation of 2025 Membership Skit

Presentation of Auxiliary Presidents

Presentation of Department Floor Officers,  
Pages, and Aide to the National  
Representative

Final Registration & Credential Reports

Nomination and Election of Officers

3:00 pm **Installation of 2026-2027 Officers**

**Following Installation**

6:00 p.m. **2026-2027 Council of Administration**

Commander and President's Dinner Reception  
Tickets \$25.

#### Reminders

- Members should stand when flags are in motion.
- Whenever the Chaplain is opening and closing Bible, everyone should stop all movement and talking.

# USA, HAPPY 250TH!

THE ANNIVERSARY IS JULY 4, 2026



VFWSTORE.ORG



Back



Front

**NEW**



**NEW! LADIES' 250TH ANNIVERSARY V-NECK T-SHIRT** Navy blue 100% preshrunk cotton. Screened design on front. VFW logo screened right sleeve. Imported; decorated in the USA. 7450 S-3XL \$24.00



**NEW**

**NEW! 1776 FLAG CAP** Five-panel, structured, with hook-and-loop closure. Woven loop label on closure "EST 1899" for the year the VFW was founded; imported; decorated in the USA. 7201 \$20.00

**NEW! MEN'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY T-SHIRT** Navy blue 100% preshrunk cotton. Screened design on back. VFW logo screened left chest. U.S. flag screened left sleeve. Imported; decorated in the USA. 7499 S-3XL \$24.00

**NEW**



**NEW! SUMMER FIREWORKS PUZZLE** 500 pieces. Finished size: 20 x 20". Average time to complete: 4-6 hours. Made in the USA. 1247 \$20.00

**NEW**



**MADE IN USA**

**NEW! 250TH ANNIVERSARY FLAG** Navy blue 3 x 5' nylon single reverse flag, reads correctly from one side. 250th America Anniversary logo printed in red, white and blue. Made in the USA. 2525 \$45.90  
The AMERICA 250 word mark and logo are trademarks owned by the United States Semiquincentennial Commission and any use of such marks is under license.



**MADE IN USA**

**THERMOPLASTIC GRAVE MARKERS** Withstand temperatures from - 20° to 150° F. Flag holder attachment on back. 16" metal rod. **Flag sold separately.**

**VFW GRAVE MARKER** Emblem measures 4 1/4" 3503 \$14.00



**MADE IN USA**

**U.S. VETERAN GRAVE MARKER** Emblem measures 6" 3509 \$14.00



**MADE IN USA**

**U.S. VETERAN GRAVE MARKER** Anodized zinc alloy. Emblem measures 6" with 17 1/2" aluminum rod. Flag holder on back. **Flag sold separately.** 3205 \$19.95



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**VFW BRONZE GRAVE MARKER** Flag holder on back. Emblem measures 5" with 17 1/2" rod. **Flag sold separately.** 3500 \$64.00