

Spera, Owens to represent national organizations at 105th VFW, 100th Auxiliary State Conventions

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Honoring Veterans

Past Commander-in-Chief Paul Spera and Past National Auxiliary President Jan Owens will represent the national organizations during the Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary state conventions June 6-9 in Springfield.

Spera of Attleboro, Mass., was elected Commander-in-Chief at the 96th national convention in Phoenix, Ariz. on Aug. 25, 1995. He was the seventh native of the Bay State to be elected to this high office.

Spera, an Army veteran, earned his eligibility in Nha Trang Vietnam from 1965-1966. Upon returning home, he was stationed at Fort Ritchie, Md., where he was part of an equipment installation team, until his discharge.

Joining in 1966, while still in Vietnam, he remains a member of Post 144 in Boston, Mass., and currently serves as the Post Quartermaster.

Upon discharge, he attended Northeastern University where he studied business administration. He then went to work for the Department of Labor's Jobs for Veterans program. He also was assistant service officer for the Department of Massachusetts from 1977-79.

He was named the "Outstanding Veteran of the Year" by the National Alliance of Businessmen and served on the Massachusetts and Attleboro memorial committees.

In 2001, he received a Presidential appointment as a special assistant to then Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi. He is currently retired from



Past Commander-in-Chief Paul Spera will represent the national VFW at the 105th Illinois VFW State Convention June 6-9, 2024 in Springfield.



Past National Auxiliary President Jan Owens will represent the national VFW Auxiliary at the 100th Illinois VFW Auxiliary State Convention June 6-9, 2024 in Springfield.

the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

He and his wife Joanne have five children and four grandsons.

Owens of Conway, S.C., a Life Member of North Myrtle Beach Auxiliary 10804, continues to serve the organization as National Budget Committee Chairman.

She has been actively involved in the organization since joining on the eligibility of her father, Arlen Owens, a World War II U.S. Army veteran and Purple Heart recipient.

She has served as Auxiliary and District President, and in 1993-1994, she was

named Runner-up Department President of the Year in her membership group. Nationally, she has served as Publicity Director, Patriotic Instructor, and as Chairman for the Southern Conference on the Americanism and Hospital programs.

As 2009-2010 National President, she led members behind her theme "It's Time for America's Military Heroes." Jan encouraged members to step up their membership recruitment efforts and raise \$3 million to assist members with cancer and fund important research to fight this disease. The organization reached its highest percentage in

membership in nearly a decade.

Jan served the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary as National Secretary-Treasurer from 2010-2017, where she directed the daily activities of National Headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., including supervising staff: administering the financial affairs of the organization; serving as a liaison for National Officers, the Council of Administration and 470,000 members; and clarifying Auxiliary policy.

Since leaving her position as National Secretary-Treasurer, Jan has returned to her home in Conway, where she is enjoying family time at the beach.

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State Commander

Brett Nila

Making a Difference



Hello everyone. The late winter and early spring of this past year proved busy, despite the weather, for many of our members.

At the beginning of March, our Department of Illinois delegation made the trek to Washington DC for the VFW's annual lobbying efforts. This was my second year participating and I found it just as rewarding as last year.

Our Illinois National Legislative Chairman Jay Hoffman and assistant Chairman Doug Jameson did a great job of preparing for the visit. They set up numerous appointments with legislators, developed agendas and divided us into teams. Everyone agreed that our visits

to legislators' offices and the discussions that took place were productive. But this year, our legislative visits did not stop with the end of our DC trip.

This year, we tried something new: an Illinois Legislative Day.

On March 13, we lobbied our state legislators in Springfield. We invited other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to participate as well. Members from the American Legion, AMVETS (including State Commander Steve Holt), MOAA – Military Officers Association of America (including State Council President Rob Tyler) the Marine Corps League and the Purple Heart Association, joined with us in visiting legislators.

Our Adjutant Quartermaster Joe Bartley spearheaded this effort, patterning it after the National lobbying model. Those of us participating met early that morning at Post 755 in Springfield. There we reviewed talking points that were agreed upon previously by the various VSOs. We then broke up into "joint" teams comprised of members from multiple VSOs.

Afterward we met to compare notes and enjoy some camaraderie. Everyone agreed that we should do this again next year and we've already identified some ways to improve the effort.

With both National and State lobbying efforts to compare now, two similarities stood out. For one thing, legislators expect to be visited. We're not intruding on them. In fact, many like to highlight their visits with constituents, especially Veterans. Which also explains why they're delighted to take group photos.

Another similarity is that many other groups are walking the halls, lobbying as well. That

reinforces our need to continue. We must ensure that our voices are not drowned out by all the other groups; that the issues important to our members are not overshadowed by the multitude of others trying to draw attention to theirs.

Later in March, I was honored to serve as guest speaker for the Vietnam Veterans Day program on March 29th at Olney Post 4226. The event included a display of about twenty sets of various Vietnam era uniforms; a small portion of Post member Kaleb Beavers' entire collection.

In recent years, I've noticed more and more Posts conducting these observances. It's great to see these ceremonies. They not only honor Vietnam Veterans, they also remind the public to support our troops, by recalling an era when they were not.

Preparations for our State Convention, June 6 - 8, are gaining momentum. As announced earlier this year, it will be held at the BOS Convention Center in Springfield.

Hospitality rooms will be on the second floor of the Abraham Lincoln Hotel. The exhibit hall will be inside the Convention Center and should have more vendors and exhibitors than we had last year; requests for booths have been coming in for months now. And like last year, the Memorial Service will be on Thursday evening and the Patriotic Rally on Friday evening.

As the end of my year as State Commander approaches, I want to thank everyone for their support throughout the past 3 years.

Serving as your Commander for the past year has not only been an honor, but an enjoyable and rewarding experience as well. And that's primarily due to the dedication and hard work of so many Department, District and Post officers and members.

Through your efforts in assisting veterans and contributing to communities, the VFW continues making a difference and remains a relevant Veterans Service Organization.

State Senior Vice Commander

Maurice Bridges



As we continue to serve our Veterans and their families, one of the main mission goals is to advocate for veterans who have served in foreign conflicts, provide support, and camaraderie.

It was indeed an honor to advocate with the Department of Illinois Legislative Team at the 2024 VFW Washington D.C. Conference which was held March 3-7, 2024. During this conference, the Department of Illinois Legislative Team personally lobbied our respective lawmakers and watched as the VFW's current Commander-in-Chief testified on Capitol Hill before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees on behalf of veterans.

This visit for me was a memorable and unforgettable lifetime experience. In addition, this was educational and informative. If you ever have the opportunity to attend a VFW Washington Conference, I highly recommend that you do so.

If you do, make sure you have some comfortable shoes because it's a lot of walking. Just picture the United States Capitol. All of the Senate offices are across the street from the north side of the United States Capitol and all of the House of Representatives offices are across the street from the south side of the United States Capitol. Think of it this way, if you have an appointment in a Senate office building and your next appointment is in a House of Representatives building, then you will be walking from one end of the Hill to the other end which is about a twenty-five-minute walk.

Also, during the Washington Conference, the Voice of Democracy Parade of Winners was held. Each State winner was escorted on stage by their State Commander and Auxiliary

President. This year's national Voice of Democracy first place winner was Sophia Lin, from Scottsdale, Arizona.

Congratulations to the Illinois VOD State winner Riley Malone, from Brimfield, Illinois. Riley came in fourteenth place. It was great to see our young students / future leaders compete in one of the VFW's premier annual Scholarship events. Once again, I want to thank all the Posts and Districts who participated in the 2023-2024 Patriots Pen and Voice of Democracy programs this year.

Next year's theme is out for Patriot Pen and Voice of Democracy:

- The Patriot Pen theme is: "My Voice in America's Democracy?"

- The Voice of Democracy theme is: "Is America Today Our Forefathers Vision?"

Let's get the word out now about this VFW premier annual Scholarship event. Remember, don't just look for students in Public, Catholic and Private Schools. Home School is another great source to find students to participate in the VOD / Patriot Pen National Program.

The following week after the 2024 VFW Washington Conference, I again had the honor to advocate with the Department of Illinois Legislative Team. This time in Springfield IL for the Veterans Legislative Day.

The Veterans Legislative Day was held on March 13 at the Illinois State Capitol and the Stratton Building.

A huge difference between the 2024 VFW Washington Conference and the Veterans

Legislative Day in Springfield was the Veterans Legislative Day consisted of other Veterans organizations. Veterans Legislative Day advocates consisted of the VFW, American Legion, Marine Corps League, Military Officers Association of America, AMVETS, Purple Heart Assoc and DAV at a minimum.

When you have Veterans groups advocate together at one time, they become a stronger force, i.e., like the military total force concept and the impact in much more effective.

The Veterans Legislative Day advocates were divided into three teams. The three teams were a northern, central and southern team.

Each team lobbied Senators and Representatives in their area. This was the first time that a Veterans Legislative Day happened in Illinois and most impressively, it happened with multiple Veterans groups. At the end of our Veterans Legislative

Day visit, we had an after-action meeting where all feedback was positive and all want this will happen again next year.

By now, all Post and District Officers should be installed for the upcoming 2024-2025 year. In addition, all Election Reports and proof of eligibility should have been submitted to the Post and District Adjutants.

Best wishes to our newly elected and appointed Post and District Officers for the 2024-2025 year. I truly hope that all the goals that each of you have set for yourselves are accomplished during the 2024-2025 term.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the important work the staff at our State Headquarters does each and every day.

In closing, I am looking forward to seeing everyone at our upcoming State Convention.

Remember, Veterans and Their Families - We Got You.

State Junior Vice Commander

Eugene Blackwell



Advocating for Veterans: The VFW's Commitment to Legislative Priorities

As part of the ongoing efforts to support and empower Veterans, our Illinois VFW recently embarked on a significant advocacy journey to Capitol Hill in Washington DC. Led by dedicated individuals like Comrades Jay Hoffman and Doug Jameson, the Illinois VFW delegation focused on critical legislative priorities aimed at addressing pressing issues affecting Veterans, particularly concerning suicide prevention and access to benefits. Throughout the advocacy initiative, the Illinois VFW emphasized the urgent need for legislative action on four major priorities:

- Passing the GUARD VA

Benefits Act (HR 1139/S. 740): This legislation seeks to reinstate penalties for charging Veterans and survivors unauthorized fees related to claims for VA benefits. By holding accountable those who exploit Veterans seeking assistance with VA claims, this act aims to ensure that Veterans receive the support they deserve without facing financial exploitation.

- Enacting the Not Just a Number Act (HR 4157/S. 928): This bill directs the VA to incorporate benefit usage data into its annual suicide prevention report and examine the possibility of moving the office of suicide prevention to the enterprise level at the VA. By leveraging comprehensive data on Veterans' benefit usage, the VA can enhance its

suicide prevention efforts and better support at-risk Veterans.

- Passing the TAP Promotion Act (HR 3933/S. 2888): This legislation aims to improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by requiring accredited representatives from national, state, and local organizations to be included in TAP classes. By ensuring that transitioning service members have access to knowledgeable representatives like credentialed Veterans Service Officers, who can assist with filing VA claims, this act aims to facilitate a smoother transition into civilian life for Veterans.

- Supporting the Major Richard Star Act (HR 1282/S. 344): This act, either as a standalone bill or through the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, seeks to enable Chapter 61 retirees who sustained combat-related injuries to receive their vested DOD retirement pay and VA disability compensation without offset. By rectifying disparities in retirement pay and disability compensation policies, this

legislation aims to provide fair and just benefits to disabled Veterans.

In addition to advocating at the federal level, the Illinois VFW for the first time joined forces with other Veteran organizations, including AMVETS, American Legions, and DAV, for a state-level advocacy initiative in Springfield.

Among the priorities highlighted during this event were:

- Supporting SB3479 Consumer Fraud - Veterans: This bill aims to amend provisions of the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act to combat deceptive practices targeting Veterans and military members. By enhancing consumer protections and penalizing those who engage in fraudulent practices, this legislation seeks to safeguard Veterans and their families from exploitation.

Backing SB 2315/SB2700 Income Tax - Standard Exemption: These bills propose amend-

See Blackwell
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Veterans Organizations take legislative message to Springfield

A group of about 45 veterans, most of whom were Department of Illinois VFW members, took a “road trip” to Springfield on March 13, 2024 to meet with several legislators and advise them in person of our concerns about several bill that are currently pending in the Illinois Senate and the Illinois House of Representative.

The trip was the brainchild of and organized by Department Quartermaster/Adjutant, Joe Bartley, with the assistance of Commander Brett Nila and Legislative Committee Chair, Dutch DeGroot. From all parts of the State our veterans arrived and began their day with a breakfast meeting at Springfield’s Lafore Lock Post 755.

Bartley opened the meeting by distributing a worksheet prepared by the Legislative Committee that contained a description and summary of the House and Senate bills that, if passed will impact Illinois vets.

The bills of greatest concern were discussed in detail. Our vets were organized into three groups and assigned to meet with certain Representatives and Senators at pre-arranged meeting times. Those legislators included Sen. Michael Hastings and Sen. Mike Porfirio, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and several other members of the Veterans Affairs Committee. In the House, our comrades were scheduled to meet with Rep. Lance Yednock, Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and Vice Chairman, Mark Walker, plus



About 45 veterans, representing various Veterans Service Organizations throughout Illinois, took their message of important pieces of legislation directly impacting Illinois veterans to Springfield during a State Legislative Day in the state capitol.

many other members of that committee. Several other influential Senators and Representative also were on the contact list.

All of these legislators are especially important because their positions on the bills we are most concerned about will have dramatic effect on whether they are approved the committees. Such approval is required before any bill can be voted on by the full House or Senate.

Our veterans focused their discussions on two very important bills.

The first, SB3479, is an “Anti-Claim Shark” amendment to the Illinois Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Practices Act that requires all business that purport to be able to assist veterans with VA claims must make certain disclosures about their fees and imposes very serious economic penalties for violations. This bill was approved by the Senate Committee, in large part due to a very effective Witness Slip campaign orchestrated by Dutch. On April 9, it passed

the full House by an astonishing 55-0 vote. The second is a group of related bills in the Senate and House that will provide veterans with service-connected disabilities substantial relief from property taxes on their homes. These bill have not yet been assigned to their respective committees but it is anticipated that will happen soon.

In the late afternoon most of our group assembled on the floor of the Illinois Senate for a group photo with Senator

Porfirio. They then adjourned to a local tavern for some oral after action reports. Everyone involved with the trip, especially Comrades Bartley and DeGroot thought their efforts was very effective and were most pleased with the reception by the legislators. They felt that Illinois veterans definitely have “friends in Springfield”! Especially remembered was a comment by Sen. Michael Hastings who said that this was the first time he had ever been visited by an organized group of Illinois veterans to express their positions on pending legislation. Upon leaving his office many of the group were thinking, “but it won’t be the last.”

Blackwell

Continued from Page 2

ments to the Property Tax Code and the Illinois Income Tax Act to provide tax exemptions and benefits to Veterans and their surviving spouses. By easing financial burdens and enhancing access to essential services, these measures aim to honor the sacrifices of Veterans and their families.

Under the leadership of Comrade Dutch DeGroot, state advocate liaison, the Illinois VFW demonstrated its unwavering commitment to advocating for legislative measures that prioritize the well-being and rights of Veterans. By actively engaging with policymakers and advocating for meaningful change, the Illinois VFW continues to be a steadfast voice for Veterans across the state.

As Veterans continue to face challenges in accessing benefits and support services, the advocacy efforts of organizations like the Illinois VFW are crucial in driving legislative action and effecting positive change. Through collaborative initiatives and persistent advocacy, we can ensure that Veterans receive the recognition, support, and benefits they rightfully deserve.



Some of the approximately 45 veterans representing various Illinois Veterans Service Organizations pause for a group photo on the Senate floor with Illinois State Senator Mike Porfirio. Photo courtesy of Craig Miller.



Some of the approximately 45 veterans representing various Illinois Veterans Service Organizations pause for a group photo with Illinois Representative Stephanie Kifowit.

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Smithton Soldier retires after 23 years of military service

By Barb Wilson
ILNG Public Affairs Office

Lt. Col. Wyatt Bickett's 23 years of military service was honored during a retirement ceremony March 27 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

Bickett, of Smithton, the deputy commander and officer-in-charge of the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), and a life member of Midlothian Memorial Post 2580, was commissioned as a chemical officer through the Reserve Officer Training Corps program at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in 2001.

He served on active duty in the U.S. Army until 2007 when he transitioned to the Illinois Army National Guard after returning from deployment to Iraq with the 4th Infantry Division

from 2005-2006.

"When I think about Wyatt Bickett, three things come to mind," said Col. Randy Edwards, Chief of Staff of the Illinois Army National Guard. "The first is officer in charge. Wyatt has served as the officer in charge of three separate battalions and a brigade on his way to serving 11 years as an officer in charge. The Illinois National Guard is postured well today in part because of your extraordinary leadership."

Edwards said the second thing which comes to mind when thinking about Bickett is his ability to not sweat the small stuff.

"Wyatt has mastered knowing when to get serious and dig in and when not to sweat the small stuff," Edwards said.

The final thing which comes to mind for Edwards is Bickett's

love of family and service.

"Wyatt is big on family. He loves his wife, Jenny and is very proud of his three children," Edwards said. "As far as service, no one sets out to be an OIC for 11 years. That's amazing. That's someone who truly cares about Soldiers, the unit and this organization. I wish you the best in retirement."

Edwards thanked Bickett's family for their support.

"Thank you for your support of Wyatt all these years," Edwards said. "We're not able to do what we do without the family's support."

Bickett said he and Edwards have been friends for a long time.

"Seems like a handful of years ago we were standing in the back of the RTI, the last two majors of our group standing, talking about retirement," Bickett said. "Now he's the chief of staff and I'm retiring. It's been great serving with you."

Bickett thanked a few people who he's served with throughout his career.

"I couldn't serve 23 years without people helping me out along the way," Bickett said. "Looking around the room, many of my cohorts are now the directors, so I know when I leave this organization, it's in good hands."

Bickett also thanked his family, wife, Jenny, and children, Leoni, Hatcher, and Clara.

I want to thank my family for all their support. My children were born into the military," he said. "They probably think well everyone's dad lives hours away. It's just normal to them. They probably don't think they've done a lot to support me. They're resilient."

"Jenny joined up about half-



Lt. Col. Wyatt Bickett, of Smithton, officer-in-charge of the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), thanks family, friends, and fellow Soldiers for their support throughout his 23 years of military service. (U.S. Army photos by Barbara Wilson)



Lt. Col. Wyatt Bickett, of Smithton, officer in charge of the 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) is presented the Meritorious Service Medal by Col. Randy Edwards, Chief of Staff, Illinois Army National Guard in a retirement ceremony March 27 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

way through the military career, but she's always very supportive of my career," he said. "I wouldn't be standing here without their support."

Bickett said he's had a lot of great assignments throughout his career.

"I've had a lot of great assignments from Germany to here," he said. "I've been fortunate to

start where I did and end where I did. My first assignment was Germany and today I'm ending my career at the 129th. There were rough assignments between, but it eventually brought me back to Illinois. What made the assignments great was the people. It's just time for me to do something different and be reenergized by it."

www.vfwil.org

Candidates seeking offices at 105th 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 offices will be opened Friday, June 8 during the afternoon business session. Nominations will be reopened and elections will be held during the business session, Saturday, June 9. Any member in good standing is eligible to seek office.

Elect
Maurice Bridges
State Commander

Elect
Eugene Blackwell
State Senior
Vice Commander

Elect
Rob Bailey
State Junior
Vice Commander

Elect
Chris Maynor
State Junior
Vice Commander

Re-Elect
Joseph Bartley
State Quartermaster

Re-Elect
Jayson Hoffman
State Judge Advocate

Re-Elect
Ryan Higginbotham
State Surgeon

Re-Elect
Gary Holmes
State Chaplain

Naperville Post 3873 Salutes 102-year-old World War II Veteran

The members of Naperville's Judd Kendall VFW Post 3873 remember their comrade, friend, and role model, Don O'Reilly, who passed away March 29, at the age of 102.

Don was a member of the VFW and the Honor Guard from its conception. He was a living history that he often shared with comrades.

Besides being an active member of the VFW, and the Honor Guard, he was also active in the GI yoga class held at the VFW.

Don gave up driving just before his 102nd birthday and lived in his own home until February. He continued to be active with the Honor Guard until this year and visited Mission Barbeque as often as possible. After he moved to St Patrick's Residence, Mission Barbecue regularly sent Don meals. His dedication to the Honor Guard, the VFW, and our nation has inspired us all.

Don's most exciting stories revolved around some of his military experiences. His fondest memory was his first airplane ride in a B17 and being in a B24 the week after V-E Day. Don's evident love of country and service was shared by several of his eight children. Two of his sons served in Vietnam, and a grandson was in Afghanistan. One of his grandsons is a WWII re-enactor, and Don said he "has more uniforms than I did". This grandson went with him to Norridge, England, for a reunion of his old Air Force unit a few years ago. And yes, he has gone on an Honor Flight to Washington, DC.

Don went to college with aid from The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. He completed his degree in eight years while working full-time. He retired as a mechanical engineer.

About a week shy of his 102nd birthday, Don served as flag bearer for the Combined Post Honor Guard during the City's observance of Veter-

ans Day, Nov. 11, 2023, at the Vietnam Wall of Remembrance along the Riverwalk in Naperville.

Thank you for your Service, Don. The Post, VFW, and Naperville salute you.

Judd Kendall Post 3873 member and World War II veteran Don O'Reilly was a fixture in the Combined Post Honor Guard, often serving as a flag bearer. Don died at age 102 on March 29. Photos courtesy of Jim Hoch.



Macomb Soldier retires after 20 year military career

By Barb Wilson
ILNG Public Affairs Office

Illinois Army National Guard Master Sgt. Kenneth Ray, of Macomb, a life member of Macomb Post 1921, retired following a 20-year military career Feb. 25 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

"Master Sergeant Ray is a subject matter expert, and a linchpin of the RTI," said Lt. Col. Nick Camardo, Commander, 1st Battalion, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute). "He is a tactical expert with 20 years of experience. Congratulations on your retirement."

Ray enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard on Dec. 20, 2003 as an administrative specialist. During his military career, Ray deployed to Egypt in 2010-2011 in support of the Multi-national Force and Observers and to Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar in 2020-2021 in support of Operation Freedom Sentinel.

"Twenty years seems like a long time, but it has flown by," said Ray. "I've been to a lot of cool places and met a lot of great people over the last 20 years."

Ray thanked his family for their support over the years.

"I couldn't have done it without the support of my family," he said.

Even though Ray has hung up his uniform, he told friends and fellow Soldiers he's only a phone call away.

Among Ray's awards and decorations are the Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal third award, Army Achievement Medal second award, Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal fifth award, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with M device second award, Iraqi Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Noncommissioned Officers Professional Development ribbon fourth award, Good Conduct Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation, Army Service Ribbon, Army Overseas Service Ribbon second award, Army Reserve Component Overseas Training Ribbon third award, Illinois National Guard Lincoln Medal of Freedom second award, Illinois National Guard Long and Honorable Service Medal second award, Illinois Military Attendance ribbon tenth award, and the Illinois State Active Duty ribbon.



Lt. Col. Nick Camardo, Commander, 1st Battalion, 129th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) presents Master Sgt. Kenneth Ray, Branch Chief, 1st Battalion, 129th RTI, with a Certificate of Retirement during Ray's retirement ceremony Feb. 25 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson)

Headstrong Project tackles PTSD treatment for veterans, thanks New Lenox community for commitment to Warriors Walk

The stark reality facing active service members and veterans in the United States military is embodied by the number 22 – the daily toll of suicides within this community.

This equates to a staggering 8,030 lives lost annually, surpassing the combined losses of around 7,000 service members in Iraq and Afghanistan by the close of 2019.

Upon returning, veterans grapple with the intricacies of adapting to civilian life, only to confront a convoluted and overwhelmed bureaucratic maze within the Veterans Affairs (VA) system.

Regrettably, the VA

is severely understaffed, woefully underfunded, and inundated by the sheer volume of veterans seeking assistance. The prospect of dealing with the VA, coupled with the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, has dissuaded some veterans from pursuing disability claims. While there are commendable VA facilities, the majority lack the necessary resources to address the diverse needs of veterans. This situation underscores the pressing need for reforms and increased support. Advocacy efforts should center on securing additional funding, addressing staffing shortages, sim-

plifying bureaucratic processes, and ensuring timely and dependable access to mental health care. Reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health support within the military community is crucial, creating an environment where veterans feel at ease seeking help without fear of judgment.

Community-led initiatives, partnerships between non-profit organizations and government entities, and public awareness campaigns are integral in bridging the gap between veterans and the mental health care they require and rightfully deserve.

In 2012, a dedicated

group of veterans took a proactive step to address the mental health challenges faced by their fellow service members by founding the Headstrong Project. This non-profit organization is committed to providing confidential, barrier-free, and stigma-free PTSD treatment for veterans, active-duty service members, and their families. The Headstrong Project has made significant strides in supporting mental health, treating an average of 1,400 clients each month with the help of 275 clinicians across 15 states.

Ryan Brazel, a local Iraq war veteran and advocate for veteran mental health,

discovered the Headstrong Project in 2018.

With 22 years of service in the US Navy and as a member of the Harry E. Anderson VFW Post 9545, Ryan learned about Headstrong and its valuable services, sparking an immediate interest in the organization. Driven by a desire to contribute to the solution, Ryan took the initiative to organize a small fundraiser. Utilizing social media as a platform, the fundraiser aimed to generate funds dedicated to supporting the Headstrong Project's vital mission.

On Nov. 2, 2019, at 0900, Ryan, donning his rucksack and carrying the Ameri-

can flag, embarked on a significant journey from his home in New Lenox. He walked along the Old Plank Road Trail, providing live updates through social media to keep followers informed of his progress. The updates vividly portrayed the physical and emotional challenges that Ryan faced during the 20-mile ruck.

The impactful journey concluded at VFW Post 9545, where Ryan was warmly welcomed by his wife, Lauren, and children, Molly, Francis, and Charles.

The event successfully raised approximately \$1,800, all of which was generously donated to the

Headstrong Project. This inspiring story garnered attention and was featured in the New Lenox Patriot, reaching VFW Post 9545 members.

Notably, Vietnam veteran and Purple Heart recipient John Forsyth came across the article and was intrigued by Ryan's initiative.

Upon inquiring about the motivation behind the ruck, Ryan shared with John the mission of the Headstrong Project. In response, John expressed a desire to elevate and expand this meaningful effort. This marked the inception of the New Lenox Warriors Walk, a testament to the power of

one veteran's commitment sparking a collective movement for a worthy cause.

In September 2020, amidst the challenges posed by the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ryan and John remained steadfast in their commitment and successfully hosted the inaugural Warriors Walk. Despite initially aiming to raise \$2,000, the event exceeded expectations by generating approximately \$15,000. The success continued into 2021, with a notable increase as \$11,599 was raised, and the Headstrong Project actively participated in the Walk.

As the Warriors Walk gained momentum, 2022

witnessed significant growth, with local businesses and organizations sponsoring the event, resulting in an impressive fundraising total of \$28,000. Building on this success, 2023 proved to be even more prosperous as the Warriors Walk raised an impressive \$32,000. The cumulative efforts of these years amounted to

a remarkable total of over \$86,000 raised and donated to the Headstrong Project.

The ongoing success of the New Lenox Warriors Walk can be attributed to the dedication of volunteers and the support of generous sponsorships from the community. This collaborative effort underscores the collective commitment to supporting veterans' mental

health and the impactful role that community-driven initiatives can play in making a meaningful difference.

On Jan. 14, 2024, at VFW Post 9545, Ryan expressed his gratitude to the generous sponsors of the Warriors Walk during a heartwarming award banquet.

The event, catered by Gatto's, provided an opportunity for sponsors to gather, dine, and gain a deeper understanding of the impact their contributions had on the Headstrong Project.

Acknowledging their support, plaques were presented to the sponsors in appreciation for their significant role in supporting veterans' mental health. The highlight of the evening was a presentation hosted by Headstrong's Manager of Donor Relations and Outreach, Renee Rudolph.

A compelling PowerPoint and videos showcased the tangible difference made by the funds raised, illustrating the number of veterans assisted by Headstrong.

Since its inception in 2020, the Warriors Walk fundraisers have facilitated over 500 sessions, enabling 16 individuals to successfully complete their PTSD treatment. Additionally, the funds raised have supported the inclusion of 200 new clients into the Headstrong program. The banquet served not only as a token of appreciation but also as an opportunity for sponsors to witness the profound impact of their contributions on the lives of veterans seeking mental health support.

Plans are underway for the 5th Annual New Lenox Warriors Walk scheduled for September 14, 2024, to raise \$40,000 for the Headstrong Project.

To support the New Lenox Warriors Walk, businesses and organizations can contact WarriorsWalk@vfwpost9545.org for sponsorship opportunities.

Your support is vital to this community-driven initiative's success in providing mental health services to our veterans.



Ryan Brazel with owner and operator of Med Spa Stefanie Drozd, and Tina Nolan Med Spa Event and Business Coordinator



Ryan Brazel with Lea Pipinas, Director of Recreations, New Lenox Community Park District.



Ryan Brazel with American Legion Post 1977 Commander Anthony Zipsie.



Ryan Brazel Joseph Pisciola Detached Warrior Clothing



Ryan Brazel with New Lenox Tim Baldermann.



Ryan Brazel with James Clark Kozol Brothers Draught Manager, Special Event Coordinator, Senior-Race track Specialist.



Ryan Brazel with Nancy Caddigan, Promotions Director, WERV/WCCQ/WRXQ/WJOL



Ryan Brazel with VFW POST 9545 Commander Clark Christiansen



Ryan Brazel with VFW Post 9545 Auxiliary Member Linda Paschall and VFW Post 9545 Auxiliary Member Kathy English.



Ryan Brazel with American Legion Post 1977 Aux member Jenna Kaiser, Ryan Brazel, Aux. President Olivia Olson, Aux Sgt. At Arms Cathy Welch



Ryan Brazel with Mary Kate Burns, Ozinga Bros. Inc



Ryan Brazel with Gary Pipinas International Union of Elevator Construction Local 2

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Guide: Sam Herley is the curator of the South Dakota Oral History Center at the University of South Dakota. He earned a Ph.D. in history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has had a lifelong interest in the Civil War and its battlefields. He is also a graduate of Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, where he was an advisee of Gabor Boritt, who founded the Civil War Institute in Gettysburg.



Nokomis chief master sergeant retires with 34 years of service

By Master Sgt. Cassidy Snyder
65th Troop Command Brigade

Chief Master Sgt. Amanda G. Stewart, of Nokomis, Illinois, a life member of Scott Post 4183, was honored for 34 years of military service during a retirement ceremony at the 126th Air Refueling Wing (ARW) Hangar, Scott AFB, Illinois, March 3.

The 126th ARW Logistics Readiness Squadron (LRS) Commander Lt. Col. Brad Kahrhoff, of Trenton, Illinois, presented Stewart with a Meritorious Service Medal for outstanding service during a distinguished career in the United States Air Force.

Stewart enlisted in the Illinois Air National Guard (ILANG) in April 1990 as a material storage and distribution specialist at the 183rd Fighter Wing (FW) in Springfield, Illinois. She continued to stay within the logistics community her entire career and supported multiple aircraft.

"I chose the Air National Guard because several people from my hometown were members and I saw they had successful careers, talked about the traveling opportunities and were still able to be around home," said Stewart. "I enlisted, got a full-time job, and never left."

After graduating basic training, she returned to the 183rd to complete on-the-job training that qualified as her technical school. Stewart spent her first 18 years of service in the Logistics Readiness Squadron at the 183rd FW. She worked in the warehouse and delivered bench stock parts to various shops on base that all supported the F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft mission.

"Nothing beats hearing a fighter jet take off or fly by," recalled Stewart of her days in Springfield. "I enjoyed seeing how my duties fit into the overall mission and you can't fly without supply."

In 1993, she was ordered to state active duty in support of Operation Wave Rider, the largest state active duty mission in the history of the Illinois National Guard. More than 7,000 Soldiers and Airmen were activated after heavy rains led to record flooding of the Mississippi, Illinois, Rock, Sangamon and Wabash rivers.

"Working side-by-side with local citizens and my fellow Airmen was a memorable experience," said Stewart. "Being transported by a Chinook from one location to another was something I had never experienced. We stayed in high schools, slept in hallways and classrooms as everyone worked around the clock to stop the flooding from destroying homes."

Stewart became a full-time federal technician in 1994. She held a multitude of technician and leadership positions within the logistics career field from base level to the entire material

management.

"She was one of the hardest working, dedicated, and team-oriented Airman I have ever supervised or had the opportunity to serve with," said ILANG State Command Chief Master Sgt. (Ret) Jimmie E. Flinn, of Chandler, Illinois. Flinn was Stewart's supervisor from her young Airman years into her early noncommissioned officer (NCO) years. "That work ethic remained with her throughout her entire career and as the State Command Chief, I was proud to serve alongside her as a fellow Chief."

After working in the warehouse, she transitioned to a specialty field as a supply systems analyst. She managed all supply system activities, employing systems analysis techniques to manage and control supply system processes.

Stewart deployed multiple times in support of operations across the globe. By 2006, she supported Operations Southern Watch in Kuwait, Noble Eagle in Bahrain and Enduring Freedom in Qatar. She also supported drug interdiction and counternarcotics operations at Howard AFB in Panama City, Panama.

"You don't realize it at the time, but interacting with people on your deployments and sharing experiences and expertise will help develop you as a person and leader in the future," recalled Stewart of her many trips all over the world. "I am still in contact with people from deployments and gained different programs that I took back to help my unit operate better and more efficiently."

In July 2008, Stewart transferred to the 126th ARW after the 183rd lost its flying mission due to the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. She became a charter member of the 126th Supply Chain Operations (Management) Squadron.

"Her leadership skills really started to shine after we transitioned to the 126th," said Senior Master Sgt. (Ret.) Diane Parker, of Boston, Massachusetts, who also moved from the 183rd to 126th. "Amanda has a way of pushing you to always want to do better. She truly is a natural born leader."

While at the 126th, Stewart supported the KC-135 Stratotanker which provides aerial refueling capabilities. The KC-135 keeps the F-16s in the air and she was able to see the aircraft she previously supported refueled on numerous occasions, she said. Additionally, she supported KC-135s while deployed to Bahrain and it came full circle supporting them again at 126th.

"When Chief came into our organization, she was a breath of fresh air," said Tech Sgt. Robby Aguilar, of O'Fallon, Illinois, the NCO in charge of 126th LRS Cargo Movement Operations. "She would never tell you to



Chief Master Sgt. Amanda G. Stewart, of Nokomis, Illinois, a life member of Scott Post 4183, with her family during her retirement ceremony at the 126th Air Refueling Wing (ARW) Hangar, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, March 3.

do anything she wouldn't do herself."

Stewart supported many training deployments throughout her career. She said some highlights include places such as Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska; Powidz Air Base, Poland; Hickham Air Force Base (AFB), Honolulu, Hawaii; and Aviano AFB, Italy.

In December 2016, Stewart achieved the Air Force's highest enlisted rank of chief master sergeant and served as the president of the 126th ARW's Chiefs Group from 2017-2024.

"I knew from the beginning that I wanted to reach the top and become a chief master sergeant," said Stewart. "I had great mentors who drove me to be the best and I kept setting goals for myself and achieving them."

Not only does she drive herself at work, but outside of the uniform she is heavily involved in her community. In 2019, she received the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal in recognition of performing outstanding volunteer community service. She is a member of her local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion, supporting several Veterans Day programs and community events each year.

She was called to State Active Duty and served as the Wing Control Center Superintendent for COVID-19 testing support in 2020 and Military Vaccination Augmentation Team support in 2021.

"Any officer in the military needs to have a strong senior NCO with them," said 126th Maintenance Group Commander Col. Timothy Huchel, of Fairmont, Illinois. "Chief Master Sergeant Stewart was mine while working in the Wing Control Center during COVID-19. Her organizational skills were second to none and she did the majority of her duties work-

ing from home because of the COVID-19 restrictions. It would not have operated as meticulous as it did without her dedication and hard work."

After COVID-19 were restrictions lifted, there was a mission need in the Traffic Management Office (TMO) and Stewart attended the Traffic Management Apprentice Course. She managed TMO, Ground Transportation, and Air Transportation elements within the Logistics Readiness Deployment and Distribution flight.

"I've grown to what I hope is a better officer, serving the personnel that truly accomplish the mission around me and I owe that to her," said 126th LRS

Operations Officer Capt. Justin Högman, of Highland, Illinois. "In her time serving in our squadron, I believe she's done a great job to improve communication and mentorship amongst our Airmen."

Stewart's last military position was as the Distribution Flight Chief within the 126th LRS. She plans to stick close to the 126th as she currently works in the War Reserve Material section of the 635th Supply Chain Operations Wing as a federal civilian employee. She said she is happy to transition from a military member to a civilian employee. She plans to spend more time with her family on the weekends and further her involvement in the community.



Piatt County VFW Post 5346 Life Member, Nick Nichols, was selected as the VFW Department of Illinois Member of the Quarter. VFW Commander Brett Nila as the Illinois VFW's Member of the Month for the month of October.



VFW Auxiliary

Auxiliary President

Lynn Smith



I cannot believe how fast this year has gone. Our "Be a Warrior" year has had our difficulties, but we have worked through them. It has been a fulfilling year. It has been my honor to be your Department President. I have enjoyed seeing old friends and making new ones.

To Commander Brett and your Officers, I could not ask for a better core of comrades, it has been a pleasure to work with you. Our key to a successful year has been communication. We were effective and made a difference. I know this year is not over, we still have work to do. Never stop recruiting new members and collecting dues. By working together, we can achieve our goals.

To my District President's what a wonderful team. Thank you so much for the hospitality you have shown my line Officers and me. So many auxiliaries have made the Circle of Excellence. I could not be prouder.

To all my chairman, what can I say. You have done an outstanding job. Thank you so much.

This year has been a real learning experience. Something I will remember.

To my 15th District and my Auxiliary Beggs Gurley 5222 thank you for all the support you have given me throughout the years. I cannot wait for National Convention to receive many awards. Again, thank you Illinois for a wonderful year.

Auxiliary Membership

Rhonda Borkgren & Paula DeDoncker



Membership is a challenge for all of us. Every morning, sometimes even before I get out of bed, I check our membership. It can drive you nuts! I am constantly trying to figure out how to make those numbers move! Last year we had 17,903 members. We now have 18,067. The problem is we lost 305 members to death and another 3 through cancelled memberships. That leaves us short 164 members. Every year our membership shrinks instead of growing.

I am very thankful for the wonderful work we are doing this year. We have some aux-

iliaries that are over 120%. It's amazing and we thank you for the great job recruiting members! I would love to see our Auxiliaries be like our military and not leave any members behind. The strength of our organization depends on our membership. I am so humbled by the comrades who sign up members in our organization. Every comrade has parents, grandparents, siblings, and children who are eligible to join us. We are all family members of Veterans who served in a foreign campaign. Are we working with our Post to recruit members? If

not, why not? We should be doing membership drives together. The Auxiliary should be at least the same size as the Illinois VFW. Instead, we are not even close. Let's ask our comrades to sign up their family members in the auxiliary. We all know the Auxiliary members are out there working for our Veterans. They are calling their congressmen, contacting the schools, and working our VFW programs, right alongside our comrades. Ask them to help us out! If we work together, we will both be stronger.

We may be getting to the end of the year, but there is plenty of time to recruit members still. The year doesn't end until June 30th. Our work isn't finished. We have had a great time as your membership team. We are here for anything. Just call us. Thank you.



State Senior Vice Commander Eugene Blackwell presents a certificate from the National Veterans of Foreign Wars to retiring Sgt. Maj. Sherry Blackwell, who retired after 43 years of service.

Blackwell retires after 43 years of military service

Sgt. Maj. Sherry Blackwell, the Senior Enlisted Advisor for the Reserve Affairs Directorate of the U.S. Army Medical Command, retired after 43 years of military service.

Blackwell enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in October 1981 as a combat medic specialist.

She has served in a variety of positions throughout her career, including as the Senior Enlisted Medical Advisor for the ARmy National Guard Office of the Chief Surgeon, National Guard Bureau; SEA, Reserve Component Advisors Office, Army Medical Department Center and School; Paramedic Manager, Kabul, Afghanistan; Chief Operations Noncommissioned Officer, Kabul Afghanistan; Chief Medical NCO, National

Guard Bureau; Readiness NCO, Great Plains Regional Medical Command; first sergeant, platoon sergeant, and wardmaster, consecutively, Company C, 205th Area Support Medical Battalion, North Riverside, Illinois; Medical Evacuation NCO, 708th Ambulance Company, Chicago; Medical Specialist, 29th Infantry Division, Fort Belvoir, Virginia; Medical Specialist, 40th Medical Battalion, Long Beach, California; and Medical Specialist, 133rd Signal Battalion, Chicago.

Blackwell has a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Education from Wayland Baptist University, San Antonio, Texas.

She and her husband David have four sons, Ryan, David, Jr., Mitchell and Michael.



National VOD

awards ceremony

At right, Illinois VFW Voice of Democracy champion Riley Malone, is escorted into the national Voice of Democracy awards ceremony by State Commander Brett Nila and Auxiliary President Lynn Smith during the Parade of Champions in Washington, D.C.

Malone, daughter of Chris and Donna Malone, the District 9 champion, was sponsored by Archie Miles Post 4724 and its Auxiliary in Elmwood.

Above, Malone is pictured with National Auxiliary President Carla Martinez and National VFW Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento. She was awarded the \$2,000 Jesse A. Lewis of California scholarship at the national level.



Combat Leader retires after nearly four decades of military service

Command Sgt. Maj. Phillip Barber, then a squad leader, took a position on a rooftop in the Abu Graib neighborhood of Baghdad in 2005 so he could get a better vantage point on the enemy's attack on his Soldiers.

"Black Hawk Six is in enroute" he heard over his radio. Maj. Gen. Mark Jackson of Frankfort, Illinois, then a lieutenant colonel and his battalion commander, had decided to see the situation firsthand.

"He always led from the front," said Barber, now the Illinois Army National Guard's state command sergeant major. The command sergeant major's career would intersect often with Maj. Gen. Mark Jackson; including the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment's 18-month deployment to Iraq and the general's last assignment as the Deputy Commanding General of Operations of First Army.

Jackson retired in June after more than 38 years of service. Those who knew him best talked about his courage and cool under fire, his off-beat sense of humor dotted with outrageous movie lines, his ability to build teams and relationships, and his genuine caring for his Soldiers and their families.

But, 18 years later, Barber admits that he had mixed emotions when he heard his commander was responding.

"My first thought was 'God damn, the BC is coming out here?'" Barber said. The squad was responding to some insurgents who had fired some rockets into Camp Liberty, a coalition base in Baghdad. When the Soldiers responded, they found that the insurgents had set up improvised explosive devices along the routes leading to the site. A couple of the unit's vehicles had already been hit by IEDs.

Barber said the Soldiers respected their battalion commander and his willingness to share the risk with his Soldiers, but, at the same time, he didn't want the battalion's leadership to get hurt or killed on his watch. This fear became all too real when a plume of smoke arose from the battalion commander's direction. Jackson's vehicle was hit.

Luckily, the IED, which Barber believes was an explosively formed penetrator, passed right through the vehicle's transmission, but left Jackson and Command Sgt. Maj. Gary Fulk unharmed. Col. (ret.) Glen Peterson, who was the battalion operations officer on the deployment, said Jackson went on patrol a lot – and the vehicles he was in got hit multiple times. However, Jackson wasn't out with the troops because of bravado or just to be seen or heard, Peterson said.

"He was out in sector with the units to get a much deeper understanding of what they were facing and the resources they needed," Peterson said. "A lot

of good work gets done over the hood of a Humvee as opposed to a briefing room."

"I just couldn't sit back and ask people to do something that I wasn't willing to do myself," Jackson said. "I always felt most comfortable being amongst the Soldiers."

Sometimes that comfort bordered on the absurd. Peterson recalled sitting in a Humvee with Jackson enjoying a cold soft drink in the middle of a massive Iraqi Army cordon and search. "The Iraqi Soldiers are running all around us, tracer rounds are going off in the background, and there we are very calmly enjoying a cold soda in the back of a Humvee," Peterson said.

Jackson said that as a leader his job was to provide his Soldiers with resources and overall guidance, and then "step out of the way and let them do their job." Those who worked for Jackson throughout his career appreciated his ability to tell them what needed to be done, but not dictate how to do it.

"He empowered us to make a lot of decisions on our own. He empowered us to be leaders," said Brig. Gen. Mark Alessia, the Illinois National Guard's Director of the Joint Staff, who worked under Jackson multiple times. Jackson also served as the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team Commander and the Director of the Joint Staff before Alessia took those same leadership positions. When a subordinate's decision didn't quite work out as expected, Jackson saw it as a learning opportunity. "He'd sit you down and say 'Ok, let's talk through why this happened,'" Alessia said.

Few have ever seen Jackson get agitated. Perhaps this was a skill he cultivated from his decades as an Illinois State Police trooper and being placed in tense and volatile situations daily. Or maybe it is just his nature.

"He's unflappable. He doesn't change his bearing," said Col. (ret.) Clay Kuetemeyer. Jackson was a platoon leader and Kuetemeyer was an ROTC cadet when the two met in 1989. The two worked together off and on for more than 30 years.

He had a way of building relationships, a skill that proved vital in Iraq where the Blackhawks went through seven different transfers of authority and the unit was moved around to shore up different trouble areas, Peterson said. "He built trusting relationships with our multi-national partners, which is really tough to do because the Iraqis had a whole other way of doing things."

Jackson's relationship building, his down-to-earth calm leadership style, and his willingness to share danger with his Soldiers was vital to unit morale when the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry was preparing to go home only to be extended when the fighting in al Anbar Province, particularly Fallujah



First Army Soldiers and civilians formally welcome the new Deputy Commanding General of Operations, Maj. Gen. Mark Jackson, to First Army and Rock Island Arsenal on July 1, 2021. First Army was Jackson's final assignment before retiring in 2023.

and Ramadi, intensified.

"That was hard," Barber said. "But there was work still to be done. Our brothers were out there fighting and they needed us." He said that the extension required good leadership across the entire unit starting with Jackson.

It helped that the 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry was a closeknit group. Many of the unit's members, including Jackson and Barber, deployed to Kuwait in 2000 for Operation Desert Spring. Then the unit deployed again in 2002, just after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, to Germany as part of Task Force Santa Fe.

"He was always Soldier-first," said Alessia, who was on the Kuwait and Task Force Sante Fe deployments. "He had high standards and he didn't lose sight of the fact that there was a person behind every decision."

Jackson was vital in developing the Tailored Mobilization Plan while at First Army, a program that allows units to do more pre-mobilization requirements at home station prior to activation, giving Soldiers more time at home with their families before they mobilize and deploy overseas.

Army Reserve Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Jurasek, First Army's Deputy Commanding General – Support and Commanding General of U.S. Army Support Command – First Army, worked hand-in-hand with Jackson on Tailored Mobilization Plan and other initiatives to improve training across Army components. The two were both deputy commanding generals at First Army, Jackson in the National Guard and Jurasek in the Army Reserves, working with Lt. Gen. Antonio Aguto, then the First Army Commander. Aguto is now deployed as the Commander of the Security Assistance Group – Ukraine as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve

in Germany.

"We were able change the paradigm," Jurasek said. The Tailored Mobilization Plan not only allows Soldiers to spend more time with their families, but it also made the process of mobilizing reserve component units more streamlined and efficient, Jurasek added.

Jackson cultivated a "free exchange" of ideas between the National Guard, Army Reserve, and the active Army, Jurasek said of his colleague and friend. Their staffs affectionately dubbed them "Step Brothers" after the movie starring Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly.

"We would hang out together and we played off each other," Jurasek said. The climate that they fostered was as productive as it was fun, according to those who worked at First Army during Jackson's tenure. "It really was like a family," Jurasek said.

Jackson has a tremendous depth of knowledge and was "one of the most organized guys I've ever met," Jurasek said. "Everything he needed, he had it in this three-ring binder. If you need the TAG of Idaho's home phone number, he'd just pull it out of that binder...anything."

But even more impressive was the relationships Jackson had built up. "He handled all-things National Guard. He was the point man with all the TAGs of the states and territories. He knew everyone by name. If we needed someone with specialized knowledge, he knew someone," Jurasek said.

Maj. (ret.) Jen Welker worked for Jackson when he commanded the 65th Troop Command from 2009-2012, serving as the brigade's assistant personnel officer (S-1) and later as his executive officer when he was First Army's deputy commanding general for operations from 2021 until his retirement.

Jackson understood the need

to balance work with family, said Welker, a mother of four who had a three-hour round-trip commute to First Army headquarters on Rock Island Arsenal and whose husband, Lt. Col. Sean Welker, worked at Illinois National Guard headquarters in the opposite direction. "He was always understanding if we had a sick kid or other emergency. He'd say 'Go take care of your family.' He also knew we gave that time back."

The command climate was fun despite the serious work that needed to be done. Jackson gave each of the staff a nickname from NBC's 'The Office.' Welker was 'Pam.'

"He knows when to be serious, but he also likes to ensure his staff loves being at work," Welker, aka Pam, said. To paraphrase Michael Scott, Steve Carrell's boss character in "The Office," people did say that Jackson was the best boss and that he was hilarious and that he got "the best out of us."

Those who worked with Jackson all encountered his unique brand of humor, often punctuated with one-liners from a long list of wacky movies – Airplane, Fletch, Animal House, Talladega Nights, Young Frankenstein, Meaning of Life, National Lampoon's Vacation, and his all-time favorite, Blazing Saddles.

As the Director of the Joint Staff, Jackson pulled out a Blazing Saddles one-liner during a tense meeting during the Illinois National Guard's COVID-19 response, Alessia said. During a stressful meeting, Jackson said "Mongo only pawn in game of life," using the Blazing Saddles simpleton-brute's voice. It cut the tension, instantly.

"He's got a calm demeanor and the level of seriousness to get the job done, but he does it in a manner that allows people to

Jackson _____
Continued on Page 11



Veterans from Mt. Prospect Post 1337 gather before boarding Honor Flight Chicago's 110th flight to Washington, D.C. Approximately 19 Post 1337 veterans were on the flight.

Mount Prospect VFW Post 1337 Veterans Receive a Day of Honor in Washington DC through Honor Flight Chicago

Aug. 23, 2023, is a day that many members of Post 1337 will not soon forget.

That was the day 19 of them were flown to the Nation's Capital aboard Honor Flight Chicago's 110th flight for what the organization proclaims to be a Day of Honor.

The trip included a round trip flight, three meals plus snacks, local transportation to visit several of the city's military monuments and memorials, along with several surprises along the way, all at no cost to the veterans.

The event was put in motion about four years ago when HFC volunteer recruiter and Vietnam veteran, Jim Parker, visited the Post during a regular meeting at the invitation of Les Durov, then serving his first term as Post Commander, to make a presentation.

Parker had done many of these during which he hoped to get one or two qualifying veterans to submit applications to fly with HFC to DC, but he noticed something very special about this Post. That night he left the meeting with a list of over 20 interested vets and as a member of the Post 1337.

Over the next few weeks Parker met with his new comrades helped them with the paperwork and submitted the list to HFC but not before adding his own name to the list. Parker told his fellow vets that there would be about a two year wait because there was a long list of vets in line ahead of them. No one could foresee, however, that Covid-related flight cancellations would double that time.

As promised, their flight day did come, and it started early. Most of the veterans gathered

around 3:00 a.m. for a charter bus ride to Midway Airport. They arrived about an hour later and were greeted by about 150 HFC volunteers in colored shirts that indicated their assigned jobs.

Our guys received their own colored shirts (grey) marking them as the vets to be honored on this flight. In-processing took some time as there were 90 other veterans who were flying with them. But the volunteers worked efficiently and before too long they were at the gate enjoying breakfast with coffee and doughnuts.

At Dulles Airport they were welcomed with a water canon salute and by even more volunteers plus a great many flag waving locals. They boarded their bus (color coded Purple) and were greeted by their Bus

Captains.

The Captains narrated their tour of DC and the local sites they stopped to visit which included the Air Force Memorial, The Korea Memorial, the Viet Nam Wall, the Lincoln Memorial and the Udvar-Hazy Center.

Each veteran was accompanied by his personal "Guardian" who acted as a tour guide, escort and "gopher". Some of the vets had a family member as his Guardian and others had HFC volunteers from DC.

The now long day was apparently coming to a close when the veterans returned to Dulles, ate dinner and boarded their return flight.

But it only seemed that way. As they were relaxing on the plane an announcement was made that was familiar to all vets – "Mail Call!"

Each of them was then handed a large envelope filled with cards, letters and drawings from friends, family members and a few total strangers thanking them for their service to America.

Wearing mostly smiles and a few tears, our heroes read through their mail. Some read every one while others put the letters back after only one or two, choosing to review them later in private. The surprise of Mail Call was only just starting to wear off when the plane landed in Chicago. As they started to deplane, the vets came face to face with yet another surprise.

Each man was met by a young sailor from Great Lakes who would escort them from the plane through Midway back to baggage claim. Then things got a little weird.

They were marched through a canopy of American flags held by a group of motorcycle riding vets who met every HFC flight in this manner. Then they heard noises – yells cheers, music and bagpipes! This was Welcome Home, HFC style.

A couple of thousand people carrying signs and waving flags filled the baggage claim area. To the total surprise of most of the veterans, the crowd included, wives, parents, children, grandchildren, and friends who had come together, mostly in secret, to welcome them home in grand style! Many vets said that this was the highlight of their day. Most slept well that night with some very sweet dreams.

Honor Flight Chicago has been making such dreams since 2008 when it launched its first flight.

Jackson

Continued from Page 10

excel and not be afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes happen, but he allows you the opportunity to learn from them and move on," Alessia said.

Jackson was the Director of the Joint Staff during the COVID-19 response, multiple domestic disturbance call-ups, and a major flood – all of which had their own unique challenges and gravity. But the general realized that people do not perform as well under constant stress. "He tries to keep things light even during serious operations," Alessia said.

Jackson is quick with one-liners from movie characters and he's a character himself. He loves Rock-n-Roll and sports

cars. You'll see him laughing with some tough Soldiers well into the night, with a cigar clenched between his teeth and a glass of fine bourbon in his hand. Then again, you might see him with an easel and paint brush or a guitar or a wrench. "He's a mental giant," Barber said. "He's got a ton of hobbies." When Jackson mentioned becoming "a life coach as interpreted through modern dance" during his retirement ceremony, there may have been more than a few who believed him.

His most extensive interest is a passionate love affair he's had with a tall blonde for decades – his spouse, Deanna. "Although Deanna couldn't always be

there, there was not a day that he didn't talk about her," Welker said. "They have such a loving relationship. Seeing how he always kept her in mind, I'd get excited from a wife's point of view. Unfortunately, the military has a lot of divorce. They have a relationship to emulate."

The couple have a great love and pride for their adult son, Tyler. Jackson is a devoted father and husband, and he helps his Soldiers balance work and family lives too.

Maj. Glen Mommsen served as Jackson's aide-de-camp at First Army. "He always took care of his people," said Mommsen, adding that the general was "instrumental" as he and his family transitioned from 10 years of active duty to the National Guard with three boys under the age of 5. Mommsen's

4-year-old son, Beau, required treatments at the Mayo Clinic for a non-life threatening condition. "(Jackson) was always understanding."

Mommsen, aka 'Dwight,' and Jackson spent many hours on the road where they got to know each other well, although not everything was copacetic. "Our taste in music was very different. We'd listen to (Jackson's) 1980s hair music for hours on end," Mommsen said. "I like country – Texas country."

Despite their differing tastes in music, Mommsen said he enjoyed getting to know Jackson during their hours and hours of windshield time together.

"He always took care of his people," Mommsen said. "When you take care of your people, they help you achieve the organization's goals."



The veterans pause for a group photo with the volunteers during the visit to the Missouri National Veterans Memorial in Perryville, Missouri. (Photos by Cari Wagoner)

St. Clair County VAC honors District 14 area veterans with visit to Missouri National Veterans Memorial in Perryville

Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Korea Service veterans from throughout the District 14 area were honored by the St. Clair County Veterans Assistance Commission with a visit to the Missouri National Veterans Memorial in Perryville, Missouri, March 23.

The Veterans Memorial is a

lifesize replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Humana sponsored transportation by Vandalia Bus lines. Vandalia Bus lines also provided a substantial discount.

The veterans left Belleville, Illinois at 8 a.m. and returned at 3:30 p.m. The bus driver, Andre,

was also a Desert Storm Veteran.

Lunch was sponsored by Mercy Hospital of Perryville. The hospital also provided a pastor for veteran support if needed as well as offering the meal blessing.

Other sponsors included American Legion, VFW Department of Illinois, AmVets,

Humana, FRA Estate Planning of O'Fallon Illinois, Veterans training and Employment services Department, Mascoutah VFW, VAC of St. Clair County, Mercy Hospital of Perryville, M.

The veterans were greeted by police and first responders.

Vietnam veteran, John Raschke, was the guest speaker for

the event.

Memorial founder Jim Edleman, also a Vietnam veteran, visited with the veterans as well.

Vietnam veterans attending the event were Ron Milton, Doyl Brady, Phil Kammann, and Andrew Dunham. Other veterans included Doug Jameson, Amiee Wagoner, Jim Page, Steve Eller, and Cathy Stubbs.



Steve Eller and Cathy Stubbs learn more about the Missouri National Veterans Memorial during the March 23 visit to Perryville, Missouri.



Vietnam veterans were honored during the visit to the Missouri National Veterans Memorial in Perryville, Missouri, March 23.



Veterans look at the names on the Missouri National Veterans Memorial, a lifesize replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.



Veterans look at the names on the Missouri National Veterans Memorial, a lifesize replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.