

ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD
PRAIRIE SENTINEL

VOLUME 1



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Take it From the Top:

Senior Leader's Corner



Brig. Gen. Richard Neely
- The Adjutant General,
ILNG

Be a buddy. Save a life.

The phone rings and I answer. My heart drops. Not another one. What are we doing wrong? What are we missing? Soon, a photo of a young man in uniform with a bright smiling face sits next to an obituary with an ambiguous cause of death.

Within the past year the Illinois Army National Guard has lost four Soldiers to suicide and the IL Army and Air National Guard have had 44 suicide ideations reported. This challenge to our formations is a problem that is

occurring in our society as a whole with 1,474 suicides occurring in Illinois in 2017. However when you add the stress of serving in the military to your normal life and being a citizen Soldier or Airmen, this problem gets even worse.

As the Adjutant General and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, I am committed to addressing this problem! We will pull the team together to identify ways to reverse this trend within our formations. Throughout my military career, I have been amazed by what dedicated, smart and hard-working service members can do. We are experts in problem solving – in getting to the root cause, figuring it out and fixing it. We don't give up.

We have devoted resources to this problem. There are Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) classes taught regularly for our Army National Guard Soldiers. There is resiliency training. We've trained our leaders to report every suicide ideation as a Significant Incident Report (SIR) and our Chaplain Corps is actively engaged with these troubled Soldiers and Airmen.

The Illinois Air National Guard conducts annual suicide prevention training and each quarter sends out talking points on suicide prevention and resilience that includes a list of resources. Each wing has a psychological director actively engaged in suicide prevention and promoting mental health. For example, on Sept. 8, the 126th Air Refueling Wing hosted the annual Suicide Awareness Run at Scott Air Force Base.

We have an expert and committed Suicide Prevention Program coordinator and professionals trained in counseling and social work at Mount Vernon, Springfield, North Riverside and each of the Wings). MilitaryOneSource offers six free counseling sessions to all military members, no questions asked. We've networked with both state and federal Veterans Affairs as well as civilian mental healthcare providers. We work at this problem.

Still, we have lost troops – more in the past year than

in many years previous. This is a nationwide problem. According to the latest Department of Defense information, the National Guard has the highest rate of suicides at 29.1 deaths per 100,000, compared to active duty suicide deaths of 21.9 per 100,000. This DoD information is from 2017, when the Illinois National Guard had among the lowest suicide rates in the nation. This past year we've slipped into the middle of the statistical pack.

What the statistics don't show is the real human suffering caused by this scourge. These are broken families, broken homes, children without parents and parents who lost those they raised to adults. These are lost siblings, lost friends, lost spouses and lost troops. These are loved ones who went adrift devoid of hope. They left only questions. Why?

Often this problem is cast as an extension of the invisible wounds of war, as the veteran who suffers from PTSD or other combat-related stress. In reality, it is more complex. Of the 20 Illinois National Guard troops who completed suicide since 2003, about half never deployed. Of those that did deploy, some never saw combat. Military life and balancing military life with civilian work and family life can be hard even if you've never experienced the trauma of war.

The issues around our troops who are contemplating suicide are as different as the troops themselves.

However, depression and anxiety – the two conditions that most often lead to suicidal behavior – are both treatable. PTSD is also treatable. The problem is that those suffering from these ailments also suffer from tunnel vision. Often they don't seek help.

This is where **YOU** can help. Use the military buddy system. Ask questions. Check on your friends, your fellow service members, your subordinates as well as those with higher rank. There are many troops in our ranks today who are alive because other troops cared and connected them with the resources they needed.

We all struggle at some point in life. That's part of being human. There should be no stigma attached to struggling and seeking help. However, many, especially those in the military, often do not want to admit they need others to help them through this rough time in their life. So it is up to us to reach out to them and try to get them the help they need. That is the only way we are going to solve this problem.

Be a buddy, be concerned, ask the question. Save a life.

The Veterans Crisis Hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 1-800-273-8255. Services are also available online at www.veteranscrisisline.net or via text, 838255. Confidential help is also available at www.militaryonesource.mil or calling MilitaryOneSource at 1-800-342-9647. For more information on what you can do to prevent suicide in the Illinois National Guard please contact Erica Metzger, our suicide prevention coordinator, at (217) 761-3873 or erica.l.metzger.ctr@mail.mil. 

The Rundown:

Headlines and stories around the Illinois Guard

Illinois National Guard Completes Flood Operations

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – Members of the Illinois National Guard have been released from State Active Duty after more than two months of flood operations in communities along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. For 62 days, a total of nearly 830 Citizen Soldiers and Citizen Airmen comprised of six Task Forces from 14 units in communities throughout Illinois conducted flood operations in 12 counties, according to data released by the Illinois National Guard Joint Operations Center.



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178th Infantry Battalion Mobilizes for Afghanistan



SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – Mobilization ceremonies were held at various locations throughout Illinois from July 27-29, 2019 for approximately 400 Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment headquartered in Chicago. Companies A, B, C, D and Headquarters and Headquarters Company will deploy to various locations in Afghanistan in support of Operations Freedom's Sentinel.

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C-130 aircrew performs airdrops at Northern Strike

ALPENA, Mich. – The rear door of a C-130H Hercules opens in mid-flight, exposing the lush landscape of northern Michigan just a few hundred feet below. Tethered inside the aircraft, Tech. Sgt. Trent Barron, a C-130H flight engineer assigned to the 169th Airlift Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, is preparing for a piece of military cargo weighing more than 1,000 lbs. to slide from the back of the plane, and – after being caught by a quickly deployed parachute – descend gently to Earth.



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ILARNG Welcomes 28 new 2nd Lieutenants



SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – The Illinois National Guard's 129th Regiment's Regional Training Institute (RTI) Officer Candidate School (OCS) commissioned 28 second lieutenants at the Old State Capitol building in Springfield, Illinois, Sunday, Aug. 25. "What a fitting place to mark such a momentous occasion in your careers," said Brig. Gen. Michael Glisson of Festus, Missouri, Director of the Joint Staff, Illinois National Guard.

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Carpenter chosen as 183rd Wing's New Commander

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – Colonel Donald K. Carpenter of Tremont, Illinois, a veteran with multiple overseas tours, a certified expert in process improvement and someone with national level military experience, has been named the next Commander of the 183rd Wing based at Springfield's Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport where he will oversee about 900 Airmen with multiple varied missions and an approximately \$26 million operating budget.



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Ready Response 2019: 62 days of flood duty

By Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

SPRINGFIELD, ILL. – Members of the Illinois National Guard were released from State Active Duty after more than two months of flood operations in communities along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers Jul. 31.

For 62 days, a total of nearly 830 Citizen Soldiers and Citizen Airmen comprised of six Task Forces from 14 units in communities throughout Illinois conducted flood operations in 12 counties, according to data released by the Illinois National Guard Joint Operations Center. The Task Forces completed 62 requests for assistance along more than 362 miles of riverbank as part of the overall state team coordinated and led by the Illinois Emergency Management Agency to assist counties and local

communities.

“The Illinois National Guard is a community-based organization, and when our communities need help we answer the call. As they do when they deploy to fight our nation’s wars, they leave families and jobs behind to help their fellow citizens,” said Brig. Gen. Richard Neely, The Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard. “These guardsmen proved the National Guard motto of ‘Always Ready, Always There.’ The men and women of the Illinois National Guard stood with our neighbors in flood impacted areas and helped protect the communities from further damage.”

Since being activated for State Active Duty on May 30, members of the Illinois National Guard conducted sandbagging and sandbag transportation operations, levee support and monitoring, pump monitoring and served as a Quick Reaction Force.

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker activated approximately 200 Illinois National Guard soldiers for State Active Duty May 30 to assist with flood relief operations in southwest Illinois along multiple levees and other areas hard-hit by rising waters.

“As we face historic weather in this state, the safety of our communities will always be my top priority, and every relevant state agency is working in concert to protect communities,” Pritzker said in announcing the activation.

Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment in Milan, Galesburg and Springfield and



the 341st Military Intelligence Company in Chicago were notified of the activation May 29 and arrived in Quincy, Illinois May 31. The Soldiers were tasked with strengthening levees, constructing protective barriers, and providing security along the levee systems in Greene Calhoun, Scott, St. Clair, Madison, Adams and Jersey counties. The Soldiers were released from State Active Duty June 16.

On June 6, Soldiers from 233rd Military Police Company in Springfield, 933rd Military Police Company in Ftort Sheridan, 1844th Transportation Company in East St. Louis, and the 709th Medical Company in Bartonville were placed on State Active Duty. The Soldiers were sent to southern Illinois to work flood relief operations in Alton, East Carondelet, Chester and Madison County. Soldiers were tasked with sandbagging in Chester and Prairie Du Rocher, providing evacuation support in Valmeyer, Illinois and providing flood wall surveillance in Alton.

On June 11, nearly 55 Soldiers were sent to Union and Alexander counties for sandbag operations in Wolf Lake and East Cape Girardeau, Illinois. On June 16, Soldiers were redeployed for flood fight operations in Hardin, Winchester, Grafton, Jerseyville, Alton, East Carondelet, Valmeyer, Hartford, East Cape Girardeau, and Wolf Lake. By June 20, with other flood fight operations



under control, the Soldiers moved into flood fight operations in East Cape Girardeau, Illinois. They were released from State Active Duty on June 21.

Soldiers from the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion and Company E, 634th Brigade Support Battalion, both in Decatur, were activated for flood fight



operations on June 20 and sent to the East Cape Girardeau, Illinois area of operations. While in East Cape Girardeau, Soldiers transported sandbags, monitored levee and pump operations, manned the road closures and placed sandbags to control flooding.

“The Illinois National Guard is a community-based organization, and when our communities need help we answer the call.”

On July 2, Airmen from 126th Air Refueling Wing at Scott Air Force Base, 182nd Air Wing from Peoria

and the 183rd Wing in Springfield were activated and sent to East Cape Girardeau, Illinois, to continue with sandbagging in the area and to monitor levee and pump operations.

Soldiers from the 1644th Transportation Company from Rock Falls, Illinois, were activated July 9 and joined flood fight operations in East Cape Girardeau.

Soldiers from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade in Normal, Illinois, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 634th Brigade Support Battalion in Sullivan, Illinois, Company E, 634th Brigade Support Battalion in Decatur, Illinois, and 1644th Transportation Company in Rock Falls, Illinois, were activated July 26. Soldiers were sent to East Cape Girardeau to monitor pumps and levees in the small Alexander County community.

With the Mississippi River at Cape Girardeau, Missouri at 33.4 feet, a drop in river conditions of more than four inches in 24 hours, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency made the decision the area no longer needed emergency protection measures. The Illinois National Guard left East Cape Girardeau July 30. 

178th Infantry Battalion Mobilizes nearly 400 Soldiers for Afghanistan



By Sgt. 1st Class Bryan Spreitzer, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

SPRINGFIELD, ILL. – Family and Friends gathered across the state July 27-29, 2019, to say farewell to the Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment Mobilization.

Multiple ceremonies were held in Chicago, Bartonville, Elgin, Kankakee and Woodstock, Illinois, for approximately 400 Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment headquartered in Chicago. Companies A, B, C, D and Headquarters and Headquarters Company will deploy to various locations in Afghanistan in support of Operations Freedom's Sentinel.

The deployment is the largest combat mobilization



for the Illinois National Guard since 2010.

Though many times, deployment ceremonies are tearful good-byes, the Soldiers, families and friends of Company D, based in Woodstock, Illinois, shared a special moment with Spc.

Chanc McEstes of Woodstock, Illinois, during the ceremony held Jul. 27.

As the ceremony drew to a close, he jogged up the bleachers and found his girlfriend, Daphne Westfallen. McEstes pulled a small box from his pocket, knelt on one knee and proposed.

A visibly excited Westfallen, said yes.

"I didn't believe it at first. I still don't believe it," Westfallen said. "I was kind of heartbroken, I guess, but also excited because I know he wants to do something. ... He's excited to be part of something and be proud of something really big."

Illinois Governor, JB Pritzker spoke to the Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Company during their ceremony on Jul. 28.

"Your unselfish commitment to our country calls for recognition and commendation from every resident of Illinois and every American," said Pritzker. "You are the very best of our state."

After making remarks to those in attendance, Pritzker presented an Illinois flag to the unit's commander, a flag that will accompany the unit to Afghanistan and back.

In every community, family, friends and community members turned out to show their support for the Soldiers of the 178th.

"The community is great here," said Sgt. 1st Class William Hornbeck of Hampshire, Illinois, a platoon sergeant with Company D, based in Woodstock, Illinois. "They've always been incredibly supportive."

This is not the first deployment for the 178th. The unit has a storied past with lineage that is tied to the 8th Illinois Volunteer Regiment (Infantry), memorialized in Chicago's Bronzeville area.

The battalion is expected to be deployed for approximately one year. 🇺🇸



Carpenter chosen as 183rd Wing's New Commander

By Lt. Col. Brad Leighton, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.— Colonel Donald K. Carpenter of Tremont, Illinois, a veteran with multiple overseas tours, a certified expert in process improvement and someone with national level military experience, has been named the next Commander of the 183rd Wing based at Springfield's Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport where he will oversee about 900 Airmen with multiple varied missions and an approximately \$26 million operating budget.

"Colonel Carpenter is the right leader to bring the 183rd Wing into its next chapter," said Brig. Gen. Rich Neely, The Adjutant General and Commander of the Illinois National Guard. "He brings a combination of global combat experience and extensive military experience that will help grow the wing and the Illinois National Guard."

Carpenter, who is now the wing's Vice Commander, will replace Col. John Patterson, who has commanded the 183rd Wing since 2014.

"Colonel Patterson has done an outstanding job leading the wing. As a pilot, he flew both the F4 and F16 fighter aircraft. After the aircraft left the wing, he helped to build its Air Operations Group and solidified its maintenance missions in addition to many other accomplishments. We thank him for his many years of service to the Air Force and Illinois Air National Guard," said Brig. Gen. Peter Nezamis, the Assistant Adjutant General - Air and Commander of the Illinois Air National Guard.

Nezamis said there were many excellent senior officers considered for the wing's command, but Carpenter's track record of improving every organization he was assigned to was the deciding factor. "Everywhere he is assigned - every job he is given - he leaves it better than before."

For example, Carpenter was assigned to the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria for many years as a maintenance officer. During his tenure, and since, the 182nd won multiple maintenance and readiness awards. In addition, he was the senior military officer in charge of C-130 maintenance training for the Polish Air Force. Carpenter is

certified as a Continuous Process Improvement Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt and contributes countless hours to innovation, process improvement and leadership development in both the Air and



Army National Guard. Citing his unique skills and experience, Air Force Headquarters-A4, Pentagon, has sought out Col Carpenter on numerous occasions to support Air Force projects.

Carpenter said he is both honored and humbled to assume command of the 183rd Wing. "The wing has a long and distinguished history and it is still as relevant today as it was in 1948 and was flying P-51 Mustangs. The wing is vital to the protection of our nation and our state. There are challenges ahead, but with this great team of

Airmen and civilians, I have no doubt we will meet every challenge and shape a very bright future for the 183rd."

Carpenter's military experience includes two tours in Afghanistan, in 2008 and 2011 to 2012, as the maintenance squadron commander with the 182nd Airlift Wing based in Peoria. He has had military tours in Germany, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to his work with the Polish Air Force as part of the Illinois National Guard's premier State Partnership Program with Poland.

Colonel Carpenter received his commission in 1997 from the Academy of Military Science, McGhee-Tyson Air National Guard Base, Tennessee as a distinguished graduate. He has held leadership positions at the squadron and group levels of command. Prior to being named as the 183rd's Vice Commander in September 2018, he was the 183rd Wing's Mission Support Group Commander for three years. He served in multiple command and staff positions with the 182nd Airlift Wing in Peoria from 1997 to 2015.

Carpenter holds a bachelor's degree from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and a master's degree in business administration from the University of Management and Technology of Arlington, Va. He is a graduate of the Air War College and Air Command and Staff College. 🇺🇸

Illinois Army National Guard Welcomes 28 new 2nd Lieutenants

By Sgt. 1st Class Bryan Spreitzer, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – The Illinois National Guard’s 129th Regiment’s Regional Training Institute (RTI) Officer Candidate School (OCS) commissioned 28 second lieutenants at the Old State Capitol building in Springfield, Illinois, Sunday, Aug. 25.

“What a fitting place to mark such a momentous occasion in your careers,” said Brig. Gen. Michael Glisson of Festus, Missouri, Director of the Joint Staff, Illinois National Guard. “You are the future leaders of the Illinois National Guard. Remember what you’ve learned here and carry those lessons with you throughout your careers.”

Class 63 – 18 is the 63rd class to graduate from the 129th’s officer candidate program, which transforms enlisted noncommissioned officers and qualified civilians into Army officers. The OCS program is academic focused and requires candidates to hold a four-year degree. Upon completion of the 18-month school, candidates receive their commissions and are assigned leadership positions in units across Illinois.

“I’m honored to have been able to serve with my fellow classmates,” said newly-commissioned 2nd Lt. Jared Phares of Springfield, Illinois, with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade. “We worked together to support each other to achieve our commissioning goals.”

Phares earned the Erickson Trophy, an award given to the Distinguished Honor Graduate of each OCS class. The criteria included physical fitness, grades in coursework and leadership ability. Phares also took home the Outstanding Leadership Award.

Phares credited his classmates for his success. Having fought through broken bones, fractures, and a brush with cancer that ultimately turned out to be



benign, Phares said he used those hurdles to fuel himself and help his classmates.

“I couldn’t have been in the running for these awards without the help and support of my classmates and peers, said Phares. “After all of my personal roadblocks, I wanted my peers to succeed, so I made their success my motivation.”

Glisson administered the Oath of Office and the Oath of Federal Recognition. The pinning ceremony followed, where the Soldiers’ friends and family pinned the second lieutenant gold bar rank on their shoulders. Once pinned, each lieutenant rendered

their first salute to a person of their choosing. The Army Song and benediction closed out the graduation.

Phares said that the long road to commissioning was a team effort.

“My classmates and I were a team, we came together as a class to achieve our goals,” said Phares. “If you choose this path, don’t quit. You chose this journey for a reason. Finish what

you started. You may regret it if you don’t.”

Twenty-seven other candidates were commissioned to second lieutenant:

Diana Bartolo of Chicago, assigned to the 333rd Military Police Co.; Marcus Bellone of Byron, Illinois, assigned to Co. D, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment; Michael Bennett of Chicago, assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard’s Recruiting



and Retention Battalion; Nicholas Crowell of East St. Louis, Illinois, assigned to Co. H, 634th Brigade Support Battalion; Brett Devlin of Chicago, who will hip-pocket his commission; Joseph Dickinson of Granite City, Illinois, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Co. 123rd Engineer Battalion; Angela Dyson of Chicago, who is awaiting her next assignment; Luke Faivre of Normal, Illinois, assigned to the 176th Cyber Protection Team; Joseph Franzese of Wayne, Illinois, assigned to C Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment; Megan Hansen of Westmont, Illinois, assigned to Co. F, 634th Brigade Support Battalion; Amanda Herr of Chicago, assigned to the 1244th Transportation Company; Matthew Hice of Bloomington, Illinois, assigned to B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment; Peter Kalenik of Chicago,

of Elgin, Illinois, assigned to 2nd Battalion, 123rd Engineer Regiment Forward Support Company; John Mulrow of Wheaton, Illinois, assigned to the 661st Engineer Company; Travis Noparstak of Barrington, Illinois, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion 178th Infantry Regiment; Andrew Ooley of Valparaiso, Indiana, assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment; Robert Piper of Glen Ellyn, Illinois, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment; Gleb Raml of Chicago, assigned to the 433rd Signal Company; David Rose of Algonquin, Illinois, assigned to B Troop, 2nd Squadron, 106th Cavalry Regiment; Matthew Smith of Georgetown, Illinois, assigned to the 3637th Maintenance Company; Craig Swart of Homewood, Illinois, who is awaiting his next



assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Co., 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment; David Keafer of Marionette Park, Illinois, assigned to Headquarters, Headquarters and Service Battery, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment; Marketa March of Alton, Illinois, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment; Dylan Mooney

assignment; Nicholas Thompson of Sycamore, Illinois, assigned to Battery A, 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment; Stephen Westlake of Mount Prospect, Illinois, assigned to Company D, 634th Brigade Support Battalion; and Christopher Zolner of Monee, Illinois, assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment. 🇺🇸

C-130 aircrew tests mettle during combat air drop training at Northern Strike 19

By 1st Lt. Andrew Layton, 110th Wing, Michigan Air National Guard

ALPENA, Mich. – The rear door of a C-130H Hercules opens in mid-flight, exposing the lush landscape of northern Michigan just a few hundred feet below. Tethered inside the aircraft, Tech. Sgt. Trent Barron, a C-130H flight engineer assigned to the 169th Airlift Squadron, Illinois Air National Guard, is preparing for a piece of military cargo weighing more than 1,000 lbs. to slide from the back of the plane, and – after being caught by a quickly deployed parachute – descend gently to Earth.

is being evaluated with a no-notice check ride to assess his proficiency. He's confident, ready for the chance to do his job well on a training mission that will realistically simulate a contested environment, including surface-to-air threats to his aircraft.

"This is my fourth year at Northern Strike," says Barron. "I was here in '12, '13, '14, and now this year. It's an awesome mission we've been doing up here with all of these training sorties."

At the controls of Barron's aircraft is Capt. John Tillotson, C-130H pilot, 169th Airlift Squadron. "We don't get to pop chaff and flares very often, so this is an opportunity to go into a restricted area where it's legal and do that," he says, referencing the strips of metal foil released from an aircraft to obstruct radar detection or confuse radar-tracking missiles. "We've had three of these missions in six days, so it's been really good for us up here at this exercise."

With training areas that include the largest restricted military airspace complex east of the Mississippi River, Northern Michigan is indeed an ideal venue for aircrew to run combat simulations



"I'm going through my head mentally, going through the checklist to make sure we've accomplished all the items for the air drop, that we are ready for something big to exit the aircraft," Barron says.

On this mission – part of Northern Strike 19, the Department of Defense's largest annual joint, reserve component readiness exercise – Barron

like this one. As an exercise, Northern Strike 19 (July 22 - Aug. 2) capitalizes on these pristine training spaces, which also include 147,000 acres of maneuver space at Camp Grayling and full-spectrum mission support capabilities at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center.

This year, more than 6,000 personnel representing 20 U.S. states and seven partner nations will join



together at Northern Strike for the synchronization of fires in a joint, multinational environment.

"I love this job because it's different all the time," said Capt. Katie Maglia, co-pilot of the C-130H carrying Tillotson and Barron. "Northern Strike is fun because of all the things we're able to do here that we don't usually get to do. It's challenging for us, but it never gets boring, it never gets old."



While Tillotson and his crew took off from Alpena, near Michigan's Lake Huron coastline, tonight they'll grace the skies over most of Northern Michigan. After the first airdrop over a training area in Rogers City, their flight plan takes them to Michigan's western shoreline, over the Sleeping Bear sand dunes

and the picturesque waters of Torch Lake, then back to Alpena for two more airdrops. The aerial gunnery range in Grayling is where the simulated surface-to-air threats and chaff deployments take place.

In Rogers City and Grayling, the crew will coordinate with Joint Terminal Attack Controllers — specialists who serve as the nexus between air power and ground forces requiring support from above.

"The level of integration that you see here, getting controlled by JTACs who are actually on the ground, is not something we often get to practice," said 1st Lt. Daniel Wallace, navigator, 169th Airlift Squadron. "It's a crucial phase of flight in the air drop environment, but it's also important to be able to practice those communication procedures with JTACs and range controllers that we don't get to do at home."

By the end of the four-hour mission, the crew will have completed all three airdrops successfully — plus at least six closed-door passes over Grayling for additional coordination with JTACs below.

"It's great training," says Barron, who passes his check flight with flying colors. "You get to work with everybody just like you do when we're over in the desert." 🇺🇸

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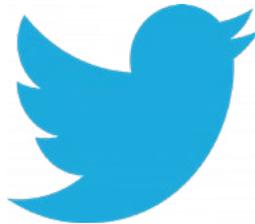
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