



**The North Carolina Army National Guard is a military force comprised of Soldiers sworn to support and defend the Nation and the State of North Carolina. A ready, reliable, responsive and relevant force, the Soldiers of North Carolina are always ready to serve—in their home towns, in other States and around the world.**

SPC Lynn Cox, of the 626th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade, North Carolina Army National Guard, pulls herself along a rope while her sponsor, SSG Donald Hill, also of the 626th Supply Maintenance Company, encourages her during the obstacle course event of the 2019 North Carolina Best Warrior Competition at the Camp Butner Training Center in Stem, N.C.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Mary Junell





## 449th TAB 2018 Outstanding Unit of the Year

by SSG Leticia Samuels

North Carolina National Guard 449th Theater Aviation Brigade leadership staff accept the 2018 Outstanding Unit of the Year Award during the annual Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A) conference at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, Tenn., April 2019.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Leticia Samuels

The ballroom erupted with applause as the 449th Theater Aviation Brigade (TAB) was presented with the 2018 Outstanding Unit of the Year Award during the annual Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A) conference at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, on April 15, 2019.

This award was established in 1959 and is awarded to a unit regardless of component or size.

The 449th TAB is recognized for the execution of aeromedical evacuations, attack helicopter operations, security, air movement, air assault, and reconnaissance support to coalition forces throughout Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan and Turkey supporting Operations Inherent Resolve and Spartan Shield.

"Thank you to Quad A and the Soldiers and family members of the 449th Theater Aviation Brigade," said COL Joseph Bishop, the 449th TAB commander. "We are proud and humbled to accept this award on behalf

of the 2,000 plus Soldiers and their Families that make up Task Force Hurricane. This is a huge honor and it is amazing to bring this home to North Carolina."

The 449th TAB assembled North Carolina Soldiers plus Soldiers from 13 U.S. States, mobilizing from Fort Hood, Texas, as a Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB), which was the largest National Guard aviation task force in the last decade.

While supporting the Central Command's area of operation, the unit stood up reactionary forces in Iraq and Syria, an aerial response force consisting of regular Army Infantry companies responding to high-risk missions within Operation Inherent Resolve and medical evacuation assets responding in Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq and Syria.

"This is a well-deserved recognition for the Guard," said CW5 Cardanose Bauknight, the 449th's senior warrant officer. "This was a lot of hard work. Sometimes the active component looks at the Guard as separate

but not equal. This goes to show we can do the job."

The CAB also supported coalition partnerships with the Australian, Canadian and Iraqi forces, and the successful integration of a Spanish Rotary Wing.

The recognition of this award is laid at the feet of a council composed of 70 Quad A members and retired Army aviation generals.

"It is a peer group that votes on this," said CSM Matthew Shorter, the 449th TAB Command Sergeant Major "They know what it is to be in Army aviation. They know what it is to lead Army aviation. They know what the problem sets are and how difficult it was. The experts are looking at what we did. It means a lot to get something like this from a group of your peers."

LTC Mark Pickett, the North Carolina State aviation officer, also in attendance, took the opportunity to recognize several National Guard Soldiers from Illinois, Connecticut, Maryland, Minnesota, Kentucky, New Jersey, Mississippi, Indiana, Tennessee, Texas,





TOP: Leaders from various National Guard States to include Illinois, Connecticut, Maryland, Minnesota, Kentucky, New Jersey, Mississippi, Indiana, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, and the National Guard Bureau are recognized by the North Carolina National Guard for contributing to the aviation task force responding to Hurricane Florence during the 2019 Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A), April 2019.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Leticia Samuels

INSET: Members of the 449th Theater Aviation Brigade leadership staff accept the 2018 Outstanding Unit of the Year Award during the annual Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A) conference at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tenn., April 2019.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Leticia Samuels



BELOW: Maj Gen Ricky Rupp (left), U.S. Transportation Command/Director of Operations, presents CW5 Tyrone Mullins, Operational Support Airlift Detachment 17 commander, with both the 2018 Joint OSA Unit of the Year award for the Large Aircraft category, and the Overall Best Joint OSA Unit award during the 2019 Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A) conference at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by LTC Matthew Devivo

Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York and the National Guard Bureau.

These Soldiers made up an aviation task force responding to Hurricane Florence in North Carolina. Their combined efforts directly contributed to 346 missions, 1,300 flight hours, saving 441 lives, moving 700 personnel to include 127 animals and 500,000 pounds of supplies.

"We really just wanted to take the opportunity to recognize the States that helped us and say thank you," LTC Pickett said. "I do appreciate everybody that stood up including NGB, the 15 States, us, the North Carolina Highway Patrol, the North Carolina Air Guard and the Coast Guard."

The Quad A conference is an annual event highlighting major accomplishments within the aviation community while opening a platform to have military and civilian partners discuss the way forward in aviation operations, equipment and technology.

COL Bishop serves as the National Guard Aviation and Safety Division Chief responsible for ensuring National Guard aviation assets are manned and Soldiers are trained and equipped to respond to operational requirements supporting Overseas Contingency Operations and Homeland Defense.

"The reality of understanding the State at that level is critical to making sure we best serve the 54 States and Territories, and meet the needs of the Army components," COL Bishop said.

This is the third Nation-wide military aviation award received by the North Carolina National Guard for 2018.

The United States Transportation Command's Operational Support Airlift (OSA) awarded North Carolina Army National Guard's OSA Flight Detachment 17, based in Morrisville, North Carolina, the 2018 Joint OSA Unit of the Year in the Large Aircraft category and the Overall Best Joint OSA Unit. This highly competitive category includes 64 units from across the United States. ●







TARHEEL CHALLENGE ACADEMY



## MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY

The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program is a community-based program that leads, trains and mentors 16- to 18-year-old at-risk youth who have dropped out of high school or are struggling to find a productive and healthy path in life.

Soldier-mentors are an integral key to success for cadets in the program, as they offer the cadets guidance and support as they move through the ChalleNGe program to learn alternative ways of succeeding outside of a traditional school setting.

Soldier-mentors help teach participating youth how to gain self-discipline, leadership skills and a sense of responsibility while working to obtain their high school diploma or equivalency.

Apply to be a National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program mentor today and help make a difference for North Carolina's youth.

**VISIT [NC-TCACHallenge.org](http://NC-TCACHallenge.org)** for more information and to apply as a program mentor.

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A North Carolina Youth ChalleNGe mentor is shown congratulating a cadet at the North Carolina National Guard Tarheel ChalleNGe Academy Graduation Ceremony, hosted at the Sampson County Agri-Exposition Center in Clinton, N.C., June 2018.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SGT Joe Roudabush



# NCNG: 2019 Best Warrior Competition

by SSG Leticia Samuels

**N**orth Carolina National Guard Soldiers' physical and mental limits were pushed to their boundaries as they competed in the State Best Warrior Competition (BWC) at the Camp Butner Training Center March 4-8, 2019.

The BWC is an annual competition collecting the best junior enlisted and noncommissioned officers from each Major Subordinate Command in North Carolina to place them in a grueling four-day competition channeling their warrior ethos.

"I think the best warrior [competition] is important overall, because it reaches down to the lowest level," said SGM Shane Potts, noncommissioned officer in charge of the BWC. "It digs a little bit deeper into their fortitude, honor, pride to wear the uniform, their competitiveness and their professionalism to endure these events physically and mentally. This is really going to try them at their lowest moments when they feel that they can't do things, but they have to push to that extra step."



Sleep deprivation, 22-degree weather and physical fatigue are just a few of the obstacles competitors' battle throughout the duration of the competition. Leading up to day one and throughout the competition, the sponsor-competitor duo tackles each event systematically.

"I did a lot of research just to make sure things hadn't changed too much," said SSG Jeffrey Wyatt, sponsor to SPC Alizi Douglas. "I talked to some friends from prior deployments—rangers and special forces guys—to see what they do to prepare for these

North Carolina National Guard Soldiers begin the start of a 12-mile ruck march during the North Carolina Best Warrior Competition March 2019 at the Camp Butner Training Center in Butner, N.C.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Mary Junell

long ruck marches. I did weapons training at the unit. I developed an entire workout routine and study schedule as soon as we found out he [SPC Douglas] was moving forward."

Day two starts one of the longest days of the competition, having Soldiers start with

SPC Andrew Brotherton, assigned to the 60th Troop Command, North Carolina Army National Guard, simulates a grenade toss during an Army Warrior Task lane for the 2019 Best Warrior Competition at the Camp Butner Training Site March 2019.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Leticia Samuels





ABOVE: PFC Kendra Ebach, of the 449th Theater Aviation Brigade, plots points on a map during the day land navigation event during the 2019 Best Warrior Competition at the Camp Butner Training Site.

RIGHT: SSG Christopher Wagner, of the North Carolina Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion, 60th Troop Command, dons a protective mask as part of a mystery event during the North Carolina Best Warrior Competition March 2019 held at the Camp Butner Training Center.

North Carolina Army National Guard photos by SSG Leticia Samuels

an Army Physical Fitness Test, qualifying with a Beretta M9 and an M4 carbine assault rifle, then rolling into a 16-station obstacle course. To top off the day, competitors have two hours to complete a day and night land navigation course.

"You train up to this moment—running every day and building endurance, but when you go through those first couple of obstacles, you're already gassed," said SPC Douglas.

SPC Douglas also admitted that having his sponsor by his side to continue pushing him through the obstacle course helped a lot. He also said being a role model was another source of his motivation to keep going.

"I actually have a sister that just joined today," said SPC Douglas. "She is joining the National Guard as well. I am just trying to be a role model and show my peers you can do whatever you want to do as long as you put your mind to it."

***"When you go to fight our nation's battles, you don't know what's really out there, but if you know your stuff, you will always succeed in the mission."***

— SFC Brennen Wilson

The buckling of Soldiers' ruck sack clips echo through the air as they prepare to pump out a 12-mile ruck march in the early morning hours, kicking off the third day. Later, warriors put their knowledge to the test as they rise to the occasion of completing Army Warrior Tasks, which include rendering first-aid, weapons disassembly and assembly, and simulating prepping and mounting a claymore mine.

Sprinkled throughout the competition, Soldiers and sponsors anticipate mystery events revealed minutes before completing the event. This forces competitors to draw on common knowledge with no lead-time to prepare.

"I like the mystery events," said SFC Brennen Wilson, assigned to the 30th Armored Brigade Combat Team. "When you go to fight our Nation's battles, you don't know what's really out there, but if you know





your stuff, you will always succeed in the mission."

The last day challenges Soldiers' mental capacity as they prepare for an appearance board in front of a panel of Command Sergeants Major and engage in a media exercise. Soldiers are asked a number of questions that come from various Army regulations, military history and current affairs impacting the military.

"Coming from the infantry side, we focus a lot on tactics, shooting and movement, but we don't really focus on the nuances of the Army—some of the regulations and the bookwork that goes in there. What governs Soldiers and what governs policy?" said SFC Wilson. "He [SFC Wilson's sponsor] is the one that pointed me on the right path and got me all the study material."

While the scores are tallied on the final day, competitors and sponsors mingle with

the senior leadership and chat with their peers about the best and worst parts of the competition during a banquet.

SPC Andrew Brotherton and SSG Christopher Wagner, assigned to the 60th Troop Command, were crowned victorious during the award ceremony.

The winners will move on to the Regional competition in the spring of this year to see who will represent the State of North Carolina at the national competition.

"Congratulations to the winners and the runners up," said Adjutant General of North Carolina MG Greg Lusk. "Each and every one of you that competed in these very arduous and austere conditions we have experienced over this last week, you have already proven yourself a cut above the rest. You need to understand how personally proud I am, and I know that we as the National Guard are for everything that you have gone through in this last week." ●

TOP: SPC Andrew Brotherton, of the North Carolina National Guard's 430th Explosive Ordnance Disposal, 60th Troop Command, pulls himself along a rope during the obstacle course event of the 2019 North Carolina Best Warrior Competition.

BOTTOM: SSG Christopher Wagner (left) and SPC Andrew Brotherton, both assigned to the 60th Troop Command pose as the winners of the 2019 North Carolina State Best Warrior Competition for the noncommissioned officer and enlisted categories.

North Carolina Army National Guard photos by SSG Mary Junell





# SERVING GUARD FAMILIES

***The Soldiers and Airmen Assistance Fund*** (SAAF) is a non-profit organization established in 2004. With a mission to protect the well-being of North Carolina Army and Air National Guard Families, SAAF provides assistance to Families when other resources are not available.

If you need help, contact your chain of command, the nearest Family Assistance Center, or contact SAAF at **(919) 851-3390**, ext. 3 or **[ncngsaaf@bellsouth.net](mailto:ncngsaaf@bellsouth.net)**.



# Behind the Competition: How Sponsors Make the Competitor in the NCNG Best Warrior Competition

Story and Photos by SSG Mary Junell

Hand over hand, a Soldier pulls herself along a rope while hanging upside down, ankles locked around the rope, suspended 10 feet above a pit of shredded rubber pieces.

Just before reaching the platform at the end of the rope, the Soldier lets go of the rope and falls.

"Nothing's broken, it's just your pride that's hurt," said SSG Donald Hill, the Soldier's sponsor, as he bent down to check on his competitor.

Then SPC Lynn Cox, representing the 113th Sustainment Brigade, gets up, dusts herself off, and hurries to the next part of the obstacle course during the North Carolina Best Warrior Competition.

The North Carolina National Guard (NCNG)'s annual competition, held March 4-7, 2019, at the Camp Butner Training Center in Stem, North Carolina, is all about finding the best enlisted Soldier and noncommissioned officer to represent the State in the regional competition in May. But behind every competitor is a sponsor, pushing them to be their best.

The 2019 competition saw 11 competitors in two categories: six noncommissioned officers and five enlisted Soldiers, each of them bringing a sponsor from their unit to help them along the way.

"We've been working towards this about three months ago," said SSG Hill, who like his competitor, is also from the 626th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade.

SSG Hill said that he's been working with SPC Cox through the unit levels of the competition, helping her, getting to know her and training with her.

"It's kind of like a brother and sister

thing," said SSG Hill. "You're in the same unit together and you see each other every month. I think it helped out a lot knowing that I was here with her, supporting her and cheering her on."

Sponsors not only encourage their competitors on their quest to be named North Carolina's Best Warrior, but they also handle most of the logistics that go along with competing at the State level.

"Once they get here, the best thing you can do is go behind them, make sure they've got all their gear, make sure their gear is ready and check their uniform so they're ready for anything that gets thrown at them," said SSG Joshua Covington, the sponsor for SGT Gary Payne, both with the 694th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade.

The Best Warrior Competition is only four days long, but includes a physical fitness test, obstacle course, appearance board, weapons qualification, a written essay, a 12-

mile ruck march, a land navigation course, three mystery events and other events that test both the mental and physical strength of the Soldiers involved. It makes for long days and a lot of moving pieces.

"Without the sponsors, a lot of things wouldn't get done," SGT Payne said. "The Soldier can't be in two places at one time. The sponsor can take care of logistics stuff while you're practicing fundamentals for the competition, preparing for the appearance board or just resting."

Before the start of the 12-mile ruck march, sponsors tighten straps on the 35 lb. rucksacks their competitors are wearing and hand them bananas and bottled water.

Some of the competitors ride in a 15-passenger van, hoping to catch a glimpse of their Soldiers along the route.

"Keep it up Douglas," yelled SSG Jeff Wyatt as his competitor, SPC Alizi Douglas, passed by the open door of the van.

"I put myself through a lot of this stuff



SGT Gary Payne, of the North Carolina Army National Guard's 694th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade, uses a rope to maneuver over a climbing wall while his sponsor, SSG Joshua Covington, also with the 694th, encourages him during the obstacle course event of the North Carolina Best Warrior Competition March 2019.





again,” said SSG Wyatt, who competed in a similar competition in 2007 and serves with SPC Douglas in the 690th Brigade Support Battalion, 130th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade. “I put myself through a ruck march at the house. I put on a 50 lb. ruck and I took off for 6 miles to make sure I was going to know what he needed to do.”

Often, sponsors are someone who has had experience in the competition, and according to SSG Wyatt, that knowledge and experience are an important part of being a sponsor.

“I wrote an entire plan for workout routines, training, studying, places to get information,” he said. “You have to figure out what their weak points are and help develop those areas.”

The sponsors stay with their Soldiers through every level of the competition, and should they win, travel with them to the Region III Best Warrior Competition scheduled for May.

SGM Shane Potts, noncommissioned officer in charge for the North Carolina Best Warrior Competition, said the sponsors are even more important as Soldiers move to the higher levels of the competition.

“With a dedicated sponsor, that sponsor is able to take care of that competitor, make sure they understand the timeline and help them think of the things that will make them more successful,” SGM Potts said. “They get to know each other, then the sponsors understand exactly what that competitor needs to help them out.”

As competitors cross finish lines and complete events, sponsors cheer, bring dry clothes and ask their Soldiers how the event went, celebrating the successes and providing encouragement along the way.

The winners of the competition will not only be the Soldiers who are named Best Warrior, but also the sponsors, who were behind the competitors every step of the way. ●

LEFT: SPC Lynn Cox, of the 626th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade, North Carolina Army National Guard, works her way down a wooden beams obstacle encouraged on by her sponsor, SSG Donald Hill, also of the 626th Supply Maintenance Company, during the obstacle course event of the 2019 North Carolina Best Warrior Competition at the Camp Butner Training Center in Stem, N.C.

LEFT: SGT Gary Payne (right) of the North Carolina National Guard's 694th Supply Maintenance Company, 113th Sustainment Brigade, participates in the 2019 North Carolina Best Warrior Competition while spurred on by his sponsor, SSG Joshua Covington, also of the 694th Supply Maintenance Company.







# HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR GUARD FAMILIES

**Show your support for the North Carolina Guard while helping fellow North Carolina Guard Families by adding a new look to your car or truck.**

The North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) offers a specialty "In God We Trust" license plate and a portion of the money paid for the plate goes to the Soldiers and Airmen Assistance Fund (SAAF). The cost of the specialty plate is \$30.00, with \$20.00 going directly to SAAF.

**ORDER YOUR PLATE ONLINE TODAY** by going to [NCDot.gov/dmv](http://NCDot.gov/dmv) and typing "specialty license plates" in the search field at the top of the window or visit your local DMV office.

Soldiers from the North Carolina National Guard's 1-130th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion and Detachment 1, B Company, 638th Aviation Support Battalion march during a deployment ceremony at the Hope Community Church, in Raleigh, N.C., April 2018 prior to the unit's deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

North Carolina Army National Guard photo by SSG Mary Junell





## 30th ABCT is "ROC"ing the Road to War

Story and Photos by  
SSG Leticia Samuels

Senior leaders from North Carolina Major Subordinate Commands gathered at the Claude T. Bowers Military Center to participate in the Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) drill March 2-3, 2019, supporting the 30th Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT)'s upcoming deployment to Southwest Asia.

ROC drills are a visual learning aid that allows leaders to sit side by side as they communicate their concept of operations for a training exercise, maneuver or use of force, while describing the sequence of events in detailed phases.

"You lay it visually out and walk through a sequence of events by phases," said North Carolina National Guard Operations Noncommissioned Officer in Charge SGM

Brian Webb. "You bring all the players to the table and give everyone the utmost situational awareness of what is going on. This validates the plan to the senior staff section that says 'yes I understand this plan and here is how I am going to execute it.'"

Guard units have to attain several validation points required to complete a successful mobilization into theater. Deploying a unit of the 30th ABCT's size, which is scheduled to deploy later this year, takes numerous joint efforts and resources.

Leaders from the National Guard Bureau (NGB), U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and First Army have the opportunity to observe and ask questions about the various aspects of the moving parts leading up to this deployment.

"NGB has been a great asset for us," said MAJ Benjamin Balazs, operations officer assigned to the 30th ABCT. "They have been going to the different Guard units in the country to see who is able to support us in terms of equipment and personnel. It is not just the 30th that is deploying. We are going to have Soldiers from several different parts of the country."

The sustainment readiness model has become the evolution of National Guard units to assess and evaluate their readiness in a shorter timeframe while building combat power to deploy. Evolving from the Army Force Generation (ARFOGEN) cycle, the North Carolina National Guard is the last of the first five Guard units evaluated for the proof of concept of Army National Guard 4.0—also known as the sustainment readiness model. This model dictates units accelerate their readiness cycle by a three-year training cycle and validates their readiness in the fourth year.

"We are the last ones to rotate into a mission and can't fail," said COL Robert Bumgardner, the 30th ABCT commander. "This doesn't just stand for the 30th or the State of North Carolina—it represents all the National Guard units. The director of the National Guard and all TAGs [The Adjutants General] across the country have said 'hey, we can do this.'"

Bumgardner said the brigade would go to the National Training Center in California before deploying into country abroad without any breaks, which is atypical for Guard units.





“This is the Guard saying ‘Hey Army, we are going to do what we are going to do,’” said COL Bumgardner. “Our success is the Guard’s success.”

During this accelerated timeline, Soldiers utilize all military equipment to the fullest capacity, testing armored combat brigade teams in over 1,000 square miles of the San Bernardino County terrain.

“The biggest benefit is no Guard brigade has ever deployed all of its equipment into country,” said COL Bumgardner. “This gets all of our equipment where it needs to be, and it allows us to ‘train like we fight.’ This also rebuilds our ability to maintain our equipment, which the Guard really lacks.”

The 30th ABCT deployed twice in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, serving in 2004 and 2009. Their 2004 deployment took place in the Diyala Province, conducting nearly 19,000 combat patrols, 3,700 joint patrols with the Iraqi National Guard, 110 ambushes and 36 deliberate raids in efforts to capture or kill enemy forces.

The second deployment in 2009 focused



on fostering growth in the economy and the local communities by assisting with civil capacity projects and developing relationships with the local populace, key leaders in the region and the Iraqi Security Forces.

“This is the main effort for North Carolina and this has been our main effort going on two years now and it will be for the next year and a half,” said MG James Ernst, the deputy adjutant general of North Carolina. “This is our main effort and our ROC drill today. This briefing is for us to work out all the problems so we don’t have problems as we go forward so the only dumb question is the one that is not asked. I expect this to be very interactive as we work our way through this.” ●

TOP: North Carolina Army National Guard Soldiers, along with staff from the National Guard Bureau and the U.S. Army Forces Command, observe a Rehearsal of Concept drill at the Claude T. Bowers Military Center, March 2019 in preparation for an upcoming deployment of the 30th Armored Brigade Combat Team.

INSET: MAJ Charlyne Jacobs, the North Carolina Army National Guard safety and occupational manager, explains her concept for safety during the Rehearsal of Concept drill at the Claude T. Bowers Military Center March 2019.







## *Sleeping with the Fishes Gives Guard Children a Chance to Bond*

Story and Photos by SSG Mary Junell

Children of National Guard service members have a unique experience. They are not fully Army or Air Force brats as children of active duty service members call themselves, but they do have to deal with their parents being away for training one weekend a month, annual training in the summer and other missions or deployments they are called to support.

A group of North Carolina National Guard (NCNG) children recently had an opportunity to spend time with kids just like them during the Sleeping with the Fishes event March 23, 2019, at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

The event was sponsored by Kids on Guard, a non-profit organization that supports the North Carolina National Guard Family Programs.

Twenty-six children spent the night in the aquarium next to one of the large tanks holding fish and small sharks. They learned about reptiles native to North Carolina and had an opportunity to pet a yellow rat snake, a turtle and a baby alligator.

The children also completed a scavenger hunt and had a behind-the-scenes look at the aquarium after they woke up the next morning, but more importantly, they had an opportunity to see that they are not alone.

"It's really important for Guard kids to meet other Guard kids because they're so spread out throughout the State," said Kristi Wagner, an NCNG Child and Youth Program coordinator. "It's really great that they can make that connection. We find that the kids create a bond really quickly."

Wagner said that unlike the children of active duty service members, the children of Guard service members sometimes find themselves as the only military kid in their school or community.

"They are so spread out across the State that they may not have any other military

Children of North Carolina National Guard members participate in a Sleeping With the Fishes event March 2019, at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.





connection within their schools for support systems where if you were at a post or installation, you have all those support systems right there," she said.

Events like this one have been popular among Guard families. This is the fourth year Kids on Guard has sponsored the event, and Wagner said it filled up so fast that they have a second date scheduled for this year.

"I think a lot of them think they are by themselves until they come to a child and youth event [and then] they realize 'Oh, there's other people like me' and they understand and they relate," Wagner said. "We run programs for kids all through school-age and up into their teen years. We even have some who have graduated from college and want to come back and volunteer with the youth program because it's made such an impact on them."

Olivia Wilber, the daughter of Maj Michael Wilber, commander of the North Carolina Air National Guard's 145th Maintenance Operations Flight, has seen her father through multiple military schools, a deployment and several shorter missions—all ranging from a week to nine months.



"It's enjoyable to find out how other kids might also have some struggles, how their parents move away sometimes and it might be hard for them," Olivia said. "It's kind of nice to know that you can interact with other kids who have the same problem as you."

Olivia's father, whose mission tempo has slowed the last few years, said his daughter commented recently that she thinks it is weird that he has been around so much lately.

He also said that he is thankful that his son and daughter are able to participate in programs like this.

"You've got other kids at these events that have similar stories that the kids don't get from their school friends," Maj Wilber said. "It helps ease some of the stress of having to be away, knowing that there's a support system back home." ●

TOP: The daughter of a North Carolina National Guard member watches jellyfish swimming in a tank as she participates in a Sleeping With the Fishes event March 2019, at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

INSET: Participants of a Kids on Guard-sponsored Sleeping With the Fishes event, gather around a replica of a Megalodon Shark jaw during the event held March 2019, at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.





# INVESTING IN SOLDIERS, INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

**The North Carolina National Guard Tuition Assistance Program** (NCTAP) provides tuition assistance for active members of the North Carolina Army or Air National Guard. Assistance for tuition to qualified members of the North Carolina Guard is **AWARDED UP TO \$4,515 PER ACADEMIC YEAR.**

**To qualify for funds, a Service Member must:**

- Be an active drilling member of the North Carolina National Guard prior to the start date of classes
- Be in good standing (no flags for any reason)
- Be attending a school, certificate program or degree program approved to receive NCTAP funding.
- Meet the Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements for the school
- Have 2 years remaining with the North Carolina National Guard at the end of the academic period for which the award is applied

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the NCTAP, visit **[NC.NG.mil/ESO/Pages/NCTAP.aspx](https://NC.NG.mil/ESO/Pages/NCTAP.aspx)**

Aerial view of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus.

Photo courtesy University of North Carolina