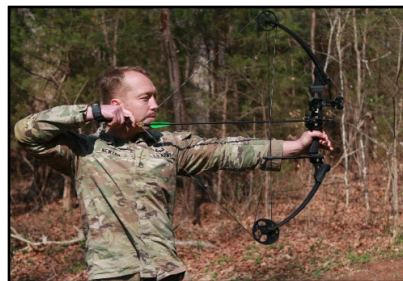




# Newton, Cooper tops at VaARNG Best Warrior Competition



Staff Sgt. Frederick Newton and Spc. Javan Cooper are named NCO and Soldier of the Year after winning the 2026 VaARNG Best Warrior Competition.



Soldiers assigned to the Virginia Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion and the Staunton-based 116th Mobile Brigade Combat Team took top honors at the 2026 VaARNG Best Warrior Competition, held March 11 - 15, 2026, at Fort Pickett, Virginia.

Staff Sgt. Frederick Newton, assigned to R&R, and Spc. Javan Cooper, assigned to the 116th, were named Noncommissioned Officer and Soldier of the Year after five days of intense competition. Newton and Cooper advance to the Region II Best Warrior Competition, scheduled for May 2026 at Camp Dawson, West Virginia.

The winners were announced at a ceremony, where Maj. Gen. James W. Ring, the Adjutant General of Virginia, Brig. Gen. Charles Martin Jr. and Command Sgt. Maj. Timothy Hawley, the VaARNG command team, and Chief Master Sgt. John Nye, the VNG Command Senior Enlisted Leader, all thanked the Soldiers for their efforts.

"You represent the best of what the Virginia National Guard offers," Ring said during the awards ceremony. "Every single one of you are rising above the best by the fact that you participated in this competition. Thanks for showing the you're willing to compete. Thanks for stepping beyond and being not an average Soldier, but a Best Warrior." *Read more: <https://vngpao.info/2p9f3rzj>*

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**116th MBCT live fires armed Switchblade UAS**

*Photos: <https://vngpao.info/2p8h6s7z>*



## VNG personnel conduct CBRN exchange in Finland

Virginia National Guard Soldiers and Airmen conducted a chemical, biological, radioactive and nuclear defense exchange with Finnish forces Feb. 23 - March 7, 2026, in Finland.

The exchange was conducted in support of the Department of Defense's State Partnership Program, in which Virginia and Finland have been formally paired since 2024. Soldiers and Airmen assigned to the 229th Chemical Company and the 34th Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and High-Yield Explosives Enhanced Response Force Package, or CERFP, participated in the exchange.

Fifteen CBRN specialists began their two-week annual training participating in Exercise Karelian Stone 26, led by the Finnish Defense Force's Karelian brigade. The exercise brought together more than 1,000 personnel, including local Finnish government and law enforcement agencies. For their role, VNG personnel teamed up with an explosive ordnance disposal team from Finland's Kymi Engineer Battalion.

After Karelian Stone, the VNG personnel joined approximately 400 other participants for Exercise Kinetic Stone. Led by the Pori Brigade, this exercise was designed to train forces in local defense missions, such as securing critical targets and cooperating with local authorities. The VNG personnel worked directly with the CBRN detachment from the Satakunta Engineer and Signals Battalion, part of the Pori Brigade, practicing their skills in realistic scenarios at a hospital, a water treatment plant and the major port in Turku.

"The successful integration of the 229th into these complex, multi-agency exercises represents a significant step forward in the Virginia Guard's burgeoning partnership with Finland, laying a strong foundation for future combined training and operations," said Capt. Charles M. Reinsel, commander of the 229th Chemical Company.

**Read more:** <https://vngpao.info/2watedxa>

## Virginia National Guard Headlines

### VNG WOCS: Soldiers pinned as warrant officers

Four Soldiers graduated from the Virginia Army National Guard's Warrant Officer Candidate School and were appointed as warrant officers March 8, 2026, at Fort Pickett, Virginia.

**Read more:** <https://vngpao.info/ycknweyp>

### VaANG conducts medical exchange in Tajikistan

Virginia National Guard Airmen assigned to Detachment 1, 192nd Medical Group, 192nd Wing conducted a combat medical exchange Feb. 2 - 6, 2026, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

**Read more:** <https://vngpao.info/r6aum6w4>

### ChalleNGe Class 64 hits ground running

Class 64 of the of the Commonwealth ChalleNGe Youth Academy kicked off Feb. 4, 2026, as 68 candidates arrived for in-processing and welcomed Vice Commandant Damian Williamson at the State Military Reservation in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

**Read more:** <https://vngpao.info/bdz8fptm>

### 29ID CG Samulski promoted to major general

More than 420 Virginia National Guard personnel responded to two winter weather events in the span of a week, Jan. 23 - Feb. 1, 2026, in locations across Virginia.

**Photos:** <https://vngpao.info/5n85zuns>



**BEST OF THE VNG:** Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger, retired Maj. Gen. Timothy P. Williams, the Virginia Secretary of Veterans & Defense Affairs, and VNG senior leaders present awards to top units for 2025 at the 2026 VNG Military Ball Feb. 28, 2026, in Midlothian, Virginia. **More photos:** <https://vngpao.info/yckz42rs>

## Ceremony marks 25 years since 203rd RED HORSE plane crash

The Virginia Air National Guard's 203rd Rapid Engineer Deployable Heavy Operational Repair Squadron Engineers Squadron, 192nd Wing, conducted a memorial ceremony March 3, 2026, in Virginia Beach, Virginia, to recognize the 25th anniversary of a plane crash which claimed the lives of 18 VaANG Airmen and three Florida Army National Guard aviators.

Eighteen members of the 203rd lost their lives when the C-23 Sherpa they were flying in crashed in a cotton field near Unadilla, Georgia, March 3, 2001. The 203rd Airmen were returning home after completing a two-week military construction project at Hurlburt Field, Florida. It was the largest loss of life in the Virginia National Guard since World War II.

During the ceremony, Col. Andrew M. Weidner, commander of the 192nd Wing, gave remarks, as did several former members of the 203rd.

"Twenty-five years ago today, we lost the lives of 21 great Americans, 18 of whom belonged the 203rd RED HORSE," said Weidner. "I want to express my gratitude from the 192nd Wing, and let you know that we are all your family."

Debbie Turlip, the widow of retired Col. Thomas Turlip, who was in command of the 203rd at the time of the crash, also spoke at the ceremony. In 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the crash, she helped organize a support group of family members, which became the Charlie's Club, a RED HORSE family support group which remains active.

"We knew that what we were doing was profound. Supporting the families, supporting unit members, supporting each other. We were trying to meet that moment," she said. "There's times that

maybe you don't think you need a support group like that, but what's important to realize is that any time you do need it, Charlie's Club is there."

Turlip spoke at length about the events in 2001, and how the RED HORSE family came together to support everyone affected by the crash. Her emotional account was felt by everyone at the ceremony.



"It's hard to put into words how it feels for me, speaking on behalf of my husband, in a room that's now called the Col. Turlip Auditorium," she said. "Emotion layered on emotion, and gratitude."

Despite the quarter century which has passed since the tragic crash, the memories of the fallen Airmen endure. For Airmen newly-assigned to the 203rd, unit leadership makes sure they learn and remember.

"The tradition in the RED HORSE community is to welcome new members in front of the Squadron by presenting a red hat to symbolize their place in the RED HORSE family," said Lt. Col. Carlos R. Nixon, the current commander of the unit. "At the 203rd, we add another tradition by giving the new member a dog tag with a missing piece in remembrance of the members we lost on March 3, 2001. This tradition is internal to the squadron and honors our history and those that shaped it.

"A quarter-century is long enough that some people in the unit today weren't even born when the crash happened, yet the impact still shapes the identity of the 203rd," Nixon added.

The 203rd RED HORSE provides a highly-mobile civil engineering response force to support contingency operations worldwide. Read more about the unit at <https://vngpao.info/2u9k7xeb>.

## On Guard Eternally

- Senior Master Sgt. James Beninati
  - Tech. Sgt. Paul Blancato
  - Master Sgt. Ernest Blawas
  - Tech. Sgt. Andrew H. Bridges
- Senior Master Sgt. Eric Bulman
  - Tech. Sgt. Paul Cramer
  - Master Sgt. Michael East
  - Tech. Sgt. Ronald Elkin
  - Tech. Sgt. James Ferguson
- Chief Warrant Officer 4 Johnny W. Duce
- Chief Warrant Officer 2 Eric P. Larson
- Staff Sgt. Robert F. Ward Jr.
- Tech. Sgt. Randy Johnson
- Staff Sgt. Mathrew Kidd
- Senior Master Sgt. Michael Lane
- Master Sgt. Edwin Richardson
- Master Sgt. Dean Shelby
- Tech. Sgt. John Sincavage
- Tech. Sgt. Gregory Skurupey
- Tech. Sgt. Richard Summerell
- Maj. Frederick Watkins

## More on the Web:

### Images capture Best Warrior Competition

Re-live the 2026 Virginia Army National Guard Best Warrior Competition with photos from key events, from physical fitness, swimming and kayaking to live-fire ranges, land navigation, ruck marching and appearance boards.

Photos: <https://vngpao.info/2vtcxefu>

### VNG leaders host Best Warrior breakfast

Maj. General. James W. Ring, the Adjutant General of Virginia, and other VNG senior leaders have a catered breakfast with competitors in the VaARNG's Best Warrior Competition March 15, 2026, at Fort Pickett, Virginia.

Photos: <https://vngpao.info/2p8c9sch>

### Band Soldiers earn emergency service ribbon

Three 29th Infantry Division Band members were recognized with the Virginia National Guard Emergency Service Ribbon for their winter storm response efforts

Photos: <https://vngpao.info/58cs44mr>

### VDF OCS commissions 3 new lieutenants

The Virginia Defense Force Officer Candidate School commissioned three new second lieutenants during a graduation ceremony Dec. 7, 2025, in Manassas, Virginia.

Read more: <vdfpio.info/2p9cuwc7>

### Lewis, Gardner take over at 183rd RTI

Col. M. Craig Lewis and Command Sgt. Maj. Gerald Gardner are the new command team for the 183rd Regiment, Regional Training Institute after a ceremony March 7, 2026.

Read more: <https://vngpao.info/2p8v67p2>

## VDF launches G5/7 Strategic Plans, Policy, Training Directorate

The Virginia Defense Force kicked off 2026 with the creation of a new G5/7 Strategic Plans, Policy and Training Directorate to focus on long-range strategic planning, policy development and the organization's overall training and professional development program.

The G3 Operations Directorate will focus on current operations and emergency response support to the Virginia National Guard. The G5/7 will also have responsibility for the VDF's recruiting and retention program.

"As the Virginia Defense Force continues to evolve and grow its mission set to maintain a strong alignment with the needs of the Virginia National Guard, it is absolutely critical we have the right staff organization to keep a strategic mindset towards future plans, develop policies that keep the VDF headed in the right direction and ensure our training programs

meets the needs of all of our personnel," said Brig. Gen. (Va) Rich Diddams, commander of the VDF.

"Creating the G5/7 Strategic Plans, Policy and Training Directorate is an important step in securing the VDF's future, and it is stated with strong leaders who have my utmost trust and respect."

The new organization streamlines operations and enhances how the all-volunteer reserve recruits, trains and retains personnel and supports the VDF's primary mission of augmenting the Virginia National Guard during domestic response operations and maintaining a ready reserve trained in emergency operations.

"The VDF has responded to numerous real-world activations in recent years, from wildfires and hurricanes to winter storms and water

crises," said Maj. (Va.) Michael Perini, the former VDF G3 operations officer who now heads G5/7.

Perini described the new G5/7 as a hybrid organization, one which improves resource allocation and makes processes more systematic.

"By separating training from day-to-day operations, we can dedicate resources to building a more resilient force, while the core G3 focuses on immediate mission demands," Perini said.

The core G3 will maintain focus on operational coordination, emergency management and organization for contingencies and major events. This includes maintaining the schedule of recurring high-level meetings representing the VDF at Joint Force Headquarters.

Read more: <vdfpio.info/yexs6m3m>

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