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PHOTO BY MAJ. ROBERT FELLINGHAM

Hungarian Defense Force Mi-24 Hinds of the 86th Helicopter Base and U.S. Army AH-64 Apaches of the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade fly in formation to begin a gun run June 9. The two NATO allies culminated two weeks of cooperative training with a combined live-fire at Varpalota, Hungary, during exercise Saber Guardian 21, part of the DEFENDER-Europe 21 series of exercises.

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# INDEPENDENCE DAY



Fireworks at Fort Rucker's Freedom Fest.

PHOTOS BY JIM HUGHES

## Freedom Fest overcomes rain delay to return with a bang

By Jim Hughes

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

After a one-year hiatus, Fort Rucker's Freedom Fest returned to the post's festival fields July 1 with music, food, an estimated crowd of around 7,000, a rain delay and one of the area's largest fireworks shows.

Despite the weather delay, it was awesome to see people back for Freedom Fest, according to Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence and Fort Rucker commanding general, who thanked

the crowd for weathering the hour-plus rain delay early on and sticking with the proceedings.

"I just wanted to say thank you," he told the crowd. "If you think about where we were just a year ago, how phenomenal is it that we get to come out and do this tonight? Team, the weather has parted, the jumpers are inbound – have a great night Fort Rucker!"

Three members of the Black Daggers,



The Maneuver Center of Excellence Band, Rolling Thunder, performs at Freedom Fest.



## FREEDOM FEST cont.



Darryl Worley and his band perform at Freedom Fest July 1 on the post festival fields.

the official U.S. Army Special Operations Command Parachute Demonstration Team, then jumped out of a UH-60 Black Hawk and parachuted into Freedom Fest, with the last member carrying the American flag.

Although the weather did shorten the performances of the assembled entertainers, the tunes were eventually provided by Darryl Worley, the Maneuver Center of Excellence Band and Brown Goose, while vendors provided the food, and the Fort Rucker and surrounding communities provided the crowd as thousands gathered to celebrate the nation's independence at the event.

Fort Rucker's garrison commander, Col. Robert J. Holcombe, said he was thrilled to see Soldiers, family members, post employees and members of the surrounding communities back at the festival fields celebrating the nation's independence together.

"We are so happy to be back here for

Freedom Fest – a little rain is not going to stop us," he said. "The community came out, and I'm really happy to see the turnout that we have. The fact that they came out despite the rain just shows the strength of the relationship between Fort Rucker and the surrounding communities.

"There's nothing better to start off a command with than a big event," Holcombe, who assumed command of the garrison June 17, said. "It's a big party and everyone is so happy – it's been a great experience."

The commander also thanked the hundreds of Fort Rucker employees who made Freedom Fest happen for their hard work.

"I can't say enough for their efforts and all of the planning that went into this – I am so grateful for the work that they have done," he said. "Honestly, it's their dedication to our Soldiers and families that really make all of this happen. They did a fantastic job."



# DG

The U.S. Army has partnered with the Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) to create the **Digital Garrison** mobile app. **Digital Garrison** is a one-stop information source for Army communities. The app puts real-time information into Soldiers', families', and civilians' hands and keeps military communities connected – a key part of readiness and resiliency.

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# Fort Rucker leadership takes to streets in Bowden Terrace to get housing feedback

By Jim Hughes  
*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

Fort Rucker's new garrison commander is a big fan of the post's housing walking town hall concept.

Col. Robert J. Holcombe, who assumed command of the garrison June 17, took an active role in U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence and Fort Rucker leadership's third in a series of housing walking town halls by taking to the streets of the Bowden Terrace neighborhood June 24.

"This is a fantastic idea," he said. "We get a different response when we bring Soldiers, families and communities into a theater or a fitness center for a town hall. People are a little more reluctant to talk in a big crowd, or they don't want to say something in public. But when they can have that one-on-one conversation directly with leadership, it totally changes the game."

"We get more honest answers and more heartfelt emotion – and we get our residents

an immediate response, as well," he added. "COVID made us do things a little bit differently – and helped us think of doing things that we never thought to do before. And now we're finding out that some of the new ways are actually better."

Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, USAACE and Fort Rucker commanding general, led the walk through Bowden Terrace and deemed it a success.

That success came in the form of gathering valuable feedback directly from residents while they were in their yards – at times even in their homes – and being able to take immediate action to help people with their issues, he said.

While the majority of the feedback was positive in relation to the overall quality of housing and the responsiveness of Corvias when issues did arise, some issues were brought up by residents directly to the general and his en-



PHOTOS BY JIM HUGHES

**Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence and Fort Rucker commanding general, and Command Sgt. Maj. James D. Wilson, Aviation Branch command sergeant major, speak with residents about their on-post living experience during a walking town hall through the Bowden Terrace neighborhood June 24.**

tourage: Holcombe; Command Sgt. Maj. James D. Wilson, Aviation Branch command sergeant major; Chester Witkowski, deputy to the garrison commander; Sgt. Maj. Jesus Goytia, Directorate of Public Safety sergeant major; Corvias and post housing officials; and leaders from units whose Soldiers live in housing.

Those issues included several instances of residents feeling their homes were not cleaned up to standards when they moved in, carpet quality and cleaning difficulties, a playground closed off for a lengthy time while awaiting repairs and a back yard with terrain features that result in standing water.

Francis spoke with the housing staff and assembled leaders after the town hall, and told them that while he is pleased with the quality of housing at Fort Rucker, he is never satisfied.

"It's clear we still have work to do," Francis said after the town hall. "Fort Rucker is the Home of Army Aviation where we train the

world's best aviators. We owe it to our Soldiers and their families to provide them with the best housing that we possibly can."

During the town hall, Corvias representatives spoke immediately to each resident who had issues, and scheduled times for maintenance personnel to visit, and assess and address the problems.

Francis encouraged all housing residents to take part in future walking town halls, and also to let leadership know the positives and the negatives of their experiences in living on post.

"This is why we're doing these walking town halls – we want your feedback," he said, adding that residents don't have to wait for a town hall if one's not coming up again soon. "I encourage you to work with our housing folks with your issues, or if you don't feel you're getting the response you should, work through your chain of command. They're committed to helping you – that's why they're out here tonight."





# 110th Aviation Brigade welcomes new commander

By Lt. Col. Andy Thaggard  
*USAACE Public Affairs*

Col. Michael S. Johnson assumed command of the 110th Aviation Brigade, U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence, in a ceremony at Howze Field June 25.

"I'm really excited. It's a real honor to come back to Fort Rucker and be part of the command team here," said Johnson. "I'm blessed and humbled."

The 110th's unique institutional mission is to provide the Army and allied forces with professionally trained aviation and nonrated crew members at the graduate and undergraduate level for AH-64E Apache, CH-47F Chinook, UH-60A/L/M Black Hawk, and UH-72 Lakota helicopter students. It manages air traffic services for all USAACE aviation training at five base fields, 16 stage fields and 66 remote training sites spanning over 32,000 square miles of training space. It also provides crash rescue and air ambulance support to USAACE and surrounding communities, serves as the Army's night vision device training and operations staff agency and operates the Army's most extensive radar approach control system.

"The scale of what this brigade does is absolutely staggering," said Maj. Gen. David J. Francis, USAACE and Fort Rucker commanding general. The brigade executes "31 programs of instruction, training over 9,000 students

amassing over 370,000 flight hours ... almost a quarter of the total flight hours of our entire Army (last year)."

Johnson was commissioned in 1997 from the University of California, Berkeley ROTC program, where he earned a bachelor's degree in history. He holds a master's in public administration from Harvard, a master's of military arts from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and a master's degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College. Johnson is a senior Army aviation and instructor pilot, with over 1,500 hours in the AH-64A/D/E Apache, earning the Air Medal, Bronze Star Medal, and Combat Action Badge through deployments to Iraq in 2009 and Afghanistan in 2002 and 2012. His assignments include command of the 1st Battalion, 114th Aviation Regiment at Fort Rucker, and serving in the Army G-3/5/7 War Plans Division.

"We've got to focus on safety. The brigade has a phenomenal record, but that's something we've got to do every day," said Johnson. "I want to be able to send out aviators ... that are thinking aviators. Folks that take the time to understand what they are doing, and can think (problems) through, assess what's happening and then act accordingly."



PHOTO BY KELLY MORRIS

**Col. Michael S. Johnson assumes command of the 110th Aviation Brigade from Col. George Ferido during a change of command ceremony at Fort Rucker June 25.**

# USAARL welcomes new commander

By Jim Hughes

*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

The U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory welcomed its new commander during a change of command ceremony June 30 in the U.S. Army Aviation Museum.

Col. Michael J. Tarpey assumed command of USAARL from Col. Mark K. McPherson after receiving the unit colors from Brig. Gen. Anthony McQueen, commanding general of the Medical Research and Development Command at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

After thanking McPherson for his outstanding leadership that resulted in the many successes that USAARL has enjoyed the past two years, McQueen welcomed Tarpey and his family to the command.

“Mike Tarpey has spent the past year completing his U.S. Army War College fellowship at the George Washington University School of Public Health,” the general added. “His previous experience makes him well-suited to be the next commander of USAARL. He has my trust and confidence to lead this great organization forward – congratulations, Mike.”

McQueen also thanked the Soldiers, civilians and contractors of “this great organization for their dedication and perseverance,” he said. “It’s been a year unlike any before, and yet you stayed the course and continued to uphold your commitment to USAARL’s mission. Colonel Tarpey is lucky to have this fantastic team to work with for the next two years.”

Tarpey, in turn, thanked the general and his command for providing him the opportunity to lead USAARL – “a lab at the tip of the spear in providing operational support to our warfighters,” the new commander said.

“I look forward to joining this great team and continuing the legacy of Colonel McPherson and other previous commanders,

along with the entire laboratory staff of military and civilians,” he said. “Our first and primary mission will always be to provide cutting-edge operational research and science tailored to directly improve the protection and performance of our Army Aviation warfighters, and to conserve the flying strength.

“I’ve been privileged many times over the last three decades in combat to personally witness the tremendous asymmetric advantage that Army Aviation provides to our Army, both in taking the fight directly to the enemy and in quickly removing our wounded from the battlefield while providing outstanding en route combat casualty care,” Tarpey said. “I understand that research conducted at USAARL has played a crucial role in enabling those efforts, and I’m excited for the opportunity to build on past successes by continuing to provide research that directly supports Future Vertical Lift and other key Army modernization priorities amidst an ever-changing strategic environment.”

Tarpey also thanked the outgoing commander and the entire USAARL team for their time and effort in setting him and his family up for success at Fort Rucker, and also expressed his appreciation to his family.

“You’re always in my thoughts and prayers, and I’ll never take for granted your support for what at times can be a difficult calling,” he told his wife and children. “Thanks also to my mom, who is here in person, for providing me a powerful foundation and undying support.”

McPherson began his remarks by asking all of the people who work at USAARL to stand up.

“All of the wonderful things that General McQueen said about me are really not about



PHOTO BY JIM HUGHES

**Col. Michael J. Tarpey assumes command of the U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory from Col. Mark K. McPherson as he accepts the unit colors from Brig. Gen. Anthony McQueen, commanding general of the Medical Research and Development Command at Fort Detrick, Md., during a change of command ceremony June 30 in the U.S. Army Aviation Museum.**

me, they’re about them,” he said gesturing towards those standing. “Anything you say about USAARL is really all about the people who work here and are deeply dedicated to the mission.”

He thanked his family for their support, and the entire the USAARL team for all they accomplished during his command.

“It’s been a fantastic honor to serve at USAARL as we work to ensure that the human is deeply considered and is the center of gravity in our warfighting platforms,” the outgoing commander said. “Even in the depths of a global infectious disease pandemic, this team knocked it out of the park. I’m honored to serve with them.

“USAARL is a special place where the science of medicine and the science of aviation engineering come together to solve the prob-

lems inherent in tactical Army Aviation – the only lab like it in the world,” he added. “The pandemic has made it clear that we remain in a period of great power competition. What our great scientists do or fail to do now will echo in the future as our Soldiers face our enemies in coming multi-domain fights.”

McPherson also welcomed the Tarpey family to Fort Rucker and USAARL.

“The USAARL family has consistently demonstrated its agility, its relevance, and its scientific expertise for the warfighter, for the community and for each other,” he said. “I am certain they will embrace you and love you the way they have me. The great scientists, and men and women at USAARL are the best people that you are going to lead, Mike – it’s a fantastic opportunity.”



# 'SUPERPOWERS'

## IMCOM - Training director meets with Fort Rucker employees

By Jim Hughes  
*Fort Rucker Public Affairs*

Resources were the primary concern on the minds of about 20 Fort Rucker employees who were given the chance to meet with the director of Installation Management Command – Training who was in town June 17 for the garrison change of command ceremony that same day.

Vincent E. Grewatz, the director of the garrison's parent directorate at IMCOM, didn't pull any punches with the group, telling them that he expects there to be "some really tough years" ahead, but also reminded them that they and their fellow co-workers have "superpowers" to help them through the challenges.

"IMCOM is built the way it is built by design," Grewatz said. "We're not an accident – the way we are collaborative, the way we integrate base operations services whether or not we have the resources to do it. That's really the strong suit of this organization – our communications have to be transparent.

"We can't solve all of the problems. We're certainly not resourced to serve all of the problems, and so we operate on the premise that we are smarter than any of us individually is smart. We know more than I know," he added. "If everyone has the same information, we're more likely to come out with a better outcome that will address the needs."

He said that the command excels at being agile in the area of resources.

"It's one of IMCOM's superpowers.

The other superpower is customer service," Grewatz said. "Combined, we're able to get at the challenges and direct some of those friction points more readily than others would. Our culture is based on openness, transparency, collaboration and integration."

He advised the group not to hold their collective breath for additional resources to address the many challenges that installation management professionals face every day.

"But that doesn't mean we can't do something about it," Grewatz added. "Not everything we face requires a material solution. Sometimes it will drive us to innovation and maybe we can solve it in a way that maybe we didn't contemplate to begin with."

He also advised the group not to lean too heavily on their higher command to solve the problems for them.

"On the one hand, we want someone to solve our problems or to help us – that's true and that's legitimate – but on the other hand we don't want them to do damage," he said. "I believe that the heart and soul of IMCOM is at the garrison level. This is where you touch customers, where you make a difference, where you make it happen. This is the center of gravity – you are the center of gravity.

"Here's what I want you to do as an installation, as a functional chief, as an employee: tell me what you want me to tell you to do," Grewatz said. "You know your world better than the folks above you. But you don't know



PHOTO BY JIM HUGHES

**Vincent E. Grewatz, director of Installation Management Command – Training at Fort Eustis, Va., visits with Fort Rucker employees before hosting the garrison change of command ceremony June 17.**

everything, so have a little humility. There are other ways of looking at the world and there are other constituencies that you don't deal with, but don't be shy about sharing what goes well and what challenges you have, and tell us what you want us to tell you to do so that we don't give you constraints that you can't live with even as we give you guidance that you can."

Another area that can help with successfully managing challenges in a resource-constrained environment is employee development, according to Grewatz.

"If you have a gaping hole in a skillset, there are two ways you can rebuild it. You can either grow it, because you have people who are willing, but maybe not able – but who are willing to learn – or you can hire the skillset," he said. "It depends on how urgent that need is. If it's urgent, I'm probably going to hire someone because I don't have time to do years of development to grow it. That's a judgment call."

He added that the decision to hire or grow is the necessity piece of it, but that there is an enhancement piece, as well.

"I think that a budget analyst from resource management who walks a mile in the shoes of a Directorate of Public Works

person and understands the language in the DPW world will be a better analyst when they come back," he said. "Having someone from DPW work with folks who work in a Directorate of Family, and Morale, Welfare and Recreation facility is a way of ensuring the partnership between DPW and DFMWR works well. There are some cross-cutting interests there. You're helping yourself by leveraging creatively.

"But supervisors have to buy into that, and this is where we have to all be committed to it -- as the employee and as the supervisor," Grewatz added. "There's a balance between organizational need and individual ambition, but we have to embrace the risks we're incurring when we creatively look for developmental assignments and leverage of other people's money. You can do it internally within the garrison, but also with (the U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence), too – understanding what they expect from us, working for them in a developmental assignment may be a way of improving that relationship and development.

"We can be creative in how we build teams," he said.

While there are oftentimes ways of navigating challenges above and beyond ad-

## SUPERPOWERS cont.

ditional resources, there are always risks in installation management, the director said.

“Whether they’re unacceptable risks or acceptable risks – we can have that debate,” Grewatz added. “Army senior leaders certainly have that debate, and they tell us what they’re willing to accept risks on and what they are not, and we’ll accommodate and deal with it – that’s one of our superpowers, we’re good at that.

“In the meantime, what’s frustrating you is the same thing that we all wrestle with every day – we all want to get to success – we all want to be a part of a successful, winning team,” he said. “It’s incumbent on us to ensure that the risk doesn’t go unacceptable.

“Your passion is what saves us when we don’t have the resources. Your commitment to customer service is what keeps IMCOM alive – it’s why it’s a superpower,” Grewatz

said. “We’re not always going to get the resources we need, but we dare not rest on our laurels – I need you to keep challenging the status quo and not be numbed by the environment that can be very oppressive.

“As long as our input is heard and we’ve had our day in court, we will live with the decisions of Army senior leaders because that is what we are all charged to do – be followers just like we’re leaders. Understand your busi-

ness and broaden your aperture.”

The director also thanked the employees and reminded them of the importance of their mission.

“What you do is critical,” he said. “You don’t do it for the glory and you don’t do it for the money, certainly, but we do appreciate what you do every day.”

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# THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

## Soldier earns citizenship while serving with 1-145th Avn. Regt.

By Milinda Kirchner and Kelly Morris

*USAAACE Public Affairs*

For Spc. Robert A. Murray, becoming a Soldier in the U.S. Army was an opportunity to achieve American citizenship and his dream for a better future.

The native of Jamaica serves as a unit supply sergeant with A Company, 1st Battalion, 145th Aviation Regiment, and recently earned his citizenship while serving at Fort Rucker.

"It has been a lifelong dream of mine to become an American," Murray said. "I remember watching shows as a child in Jamaica on Disney Channel and being so inspired by the lifestyle of Americans. I always wanted it for myself and now I have the opportunity to make the best of it."

Growing up, he longed for a better life with more opportunities, and through family connections was able to come to the United States as a teenager on a Green Card.

"It meant the world to me. As a child, that's all I ever wanted," he said.

"Life is also very hard growing up in Jamaica. There aren't as many opportunities there compared to the United States to create a successful future. I honestly cannot imagine what my future would look like if I was still there," he said.

Moving to the U.S. was more challenging than he expected. He soon realized the culture shock and personal struggles immigrants face. At school, he felt self-conscious about his thick Jamaican accent.

"In Jamaica what's cool is different from what's cool in America as a kid growing up. We speak differently. We dress differently. We don't act the same. Moving to America I didn't blend in. It was kinda hard for me to make friends. Now I've become more Americanized, and I don't have those struggles anymore," he said.

As he finished high school in Florida, he focused on his grades and working a part-time job. When a recruiter spoke at his school, Murray was drawn to the idea of being able to provide for himself immediately after high school, and he knew joining the military would expedite his citizenship. He had always heard good things about the Army, and believed it would be a solid foundation for his life, so he decided to enlist.

During basic training, the cold weather at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, wasn't the only challenge for Murray. Being in a delayed entry program, he had just returned home to Jamaica for a period of months and gained weight. Because of the struggles with physical training, he was a holdover and went through basic a second time.

Murray's perseverance during basic training earned him the respect of his instructors and peers at advanced individual training at Fort Lee, Virginia. He was appointed the class leader and participated in the student leadership program.

After graduating from AIT, Murray's



PHOTO BY KELLY MORRIS

### Murray

first duty assignment was serving as a supply specialist with the 541st Quartermaster Company, a field feeding company, at Camp Carroll, South Korea, where he and a fellow Soldier had to build their shop from the ground up.

"We were thrown in the pool and had to learn how to swim," Murray said.

But he rose to the challenge and enjoyed serving in Korea.

"I loved it there. Being exposed to a different culture, getting to travel on the weekends to explore Korea and seeing different sights," he said.

His move to Fort Rucker was delayed for several months due to travel restric-

tions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In October, he finally arrived at Fort Rucker and six months later became a proud U.S. citizen.

Master Sgt. Natalie Showers, who serves as B Co., 1-145th Aviation's first sergeant and one of Murray's recent supervisors, said Murray "doesn't quit," goes above and beyond, and is never afraid to ask questions if he needs help.

"His motivation makes me motivated," Showers said. "He's always looking to better himself. It helps keep the morale up and motivates everybody to achieve more. If he stays in the Army he's going to continue to do great things."

With family members living in Jamaica, Canada and the U.S., Murray said he relies on technology to keep them connected and include them in his success. As he makes plans for the future, he hopes to find a way to see them in person more.

Now that he's a U.S. citizen, Murray hopes to get accepted at the U.S. Military Academy and continue to take advantage of the multitude of programs the Army offers for career development.

"I'm very grateful to be a Soldier. The Army is an amazing organization that creates a lot of opportunities for its Soldiers. You just have to research and figure out what's best for you and the direction that it can take you in life. All the goals that I want to achieve in life, they all involve the Army putting me in that position to do so," he said.

In his youth he was inspired by the first black American president and his public speaking, and he too wants to attend Harvard and study law.

"I want to be the best I can be in life," Murray said. "This is only the start for me."

# Army launches Integrated Visual Augmentation System integration into aircraft

By Dan Lafontaine  
*DEVCOM C5ISR Center Public Affairs*

ABERDEEN PROVING GROUND, Md. — Army researchers are expanding the reach of the high-tech Integrated Visual Augmentation System to deliver capabilities to Soldiers on-board aircraft.

IVAS integrates next-generation situational awareness tools and high-resolution simulations to enable Soldier sensing, decision making, target acquisition and target engagement. The device provides Soldiers with a single platform to fight, rehearse and train.

During the research and testing phases, the Army initially focused on bringing the technology to dismounted Soldiers. During the next step, scientists and engineers developed a capability for Soldiers to maintain situational awareness using IVAS during transport in ground combat vehicles such as the Bradley and Stryker.

Now, Army Futures Command and Project Manager IVAS are testing the system to deliver the technology for aircrews and paratroopers in Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters.

“The Army is investing in resources to broaden the emerging capabilities of IVAS to improve effectiveness and safety of airborne Soldiers en route to their mission,” said Dr. Navin Mathur, IVAS platform integration project engineer with the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Center — a component of AFC’s Combat Capabilities Development

Command.

The first aircraft integration operational test with paratroopers using IVAS occurred in May at Experimentation Demonstration Gateway Event 21 — a precursor to Project Convergence 21 — with the 82nd Airborne Division aboard two Black Hawks. The same Soldiers finished testing IVAS weeks earlier during Soldier Touch Point 4 at Fort Bragg and incorporated what they learned in preparation for EDGE 21.

They received real-time video feeds to their IVAS headsets from a camera mounted to the bottom of helicopters while flying to the objective site. They could toggle among the screens, making the images larger or smaller. Two squad leaders in separate Black Hawks also coordinated a mid-flight change of mission plans using the system.

Research is now focused on providing video feeds from Air-Launched Effects, small unmanned aerial vehicles released in flight from helicopters, to paratroopers and aircrew wearing IVAS. Soldiers could also use the headsets to control ALE instead of carrying a tablet.

“During the development phases for these current and future ground and air platforms, we’re focused foremost on the putting together the user experience,” Mathur said. “The team is getting their feedback during exercises like EDGE and making quick upgrades. We’re continually refining designs to meet their needs.”

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# 'COMPLETING A CIRCLE'

## Soldier's journey from refugee to pilot

By Sgt. Jacob Hearn  
131st Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

FARKE AIRFIELD, Albania – If there is someone who knows about hard work and determination, it's 2nd Lt. Valdet Mehaj, a pilot with the 1-131st Aviation Regiment. Mehaj is an Albanian native born in Kosovo and a U.S. citizen; she never thought she would get to see Albania.

"I have never visited Albania before. It's an incredible feeling to be here, as a pilot, in uniform and in the U.S. military," she said. "I would have never gotten this opportunity to fly around Albania if it wasn't for the military. To be able to experience this just made me so happy."

Mehaj says this mission feels like "completing a circle." She grew up poor and her family became refugees of war, leaving behind what little they owned to survive violent conflict. Years later, as a contractor for the Department of Defense, her convoy traveling to Bagdad was ambushed by improvised explosive devices and gunfire.

"I thought that was it," she said. However, she was saved by American pilots, and she knew that was what she wanted to do.

"It made me want to join aviation. I knew I had a bigger mission. I couldn't just be a regular person and not give back."

Since then Mehaj has achieved that goal and became a UH-60 Black Hawk pilot for the U.S. Army. She felt the circle would soon be complete when she heard the 1-131st was going to Albania to participate in DEFENDER-

Europe 21.

"I was so excited. I couldn't believe that the Guard unit I joined was going to Albania," she said. "I didn't realize how beautiful this country really is until I got to fly around the mountains. I don't think I could have visited Albania in a better way."

Mehaj feels strongly about Defender 21, which is her first mission flying outside the U.S.

"Defender 21 is a sign of alliance," she said. "Even during a pandemic, we are able to show how we can quickly move to another country and work with other militaries and build partnerships."

Since arriving in Albania, Mehaj has flown missions and served as an interpreter and cultural adviser to the Americans and Albanians working together. She says she has been happy to take on the extra tasks.

"If we work together, we will be stronger together," she explained. "I think to keep that partnership and continuing missions and training together will open up a whole other window to experience other cultures."

Outside these duties, Mehaj has become somewhat of a celebrity. She's met with hundreds of locals, been interviewed by numerous news outlets, met U.S. Ambassador Yuri Kim, and shook hands with Albanian President Ilir Meta.

"It meant so much that they're acknowledging how difficult my journey was and that they're proud I'm here and working together



PHOTO BY SGT. JACOB HEARN

### Mehaj

with them," she said. "It was a very special moment for me, and I'll never forget it. I'll cherish it for the rest of my life."

Mehaj's family is incredibly proud of her and shocked at how things turned out in Albania.

"It is a huge deal," she exclaimed, "I don't think my mom, who was not allowed to go to school, would have ever thought that her daughter would be shaking hands with an Albanian president. My family is just so proud that I was able to come here as a U.S. military pilot and work with the Albanians and that I get to help."

Despite all of this, she remains humble and hopes her story can inspire others and help build friendships between her nations.

"Anything is possible if you work hard for it. Just when you think you can't accomplish something because the journey is too tough, that doesn't mean it's impossible and that it'll never happen," she said. "I was able to do this despite the odds against me. Anyone can do it, too. I'm hoping everyone will be inspired to succeed in their goals."

Mehaj doesn't believe she would be as successful without the 1-131st Aviation Regiment and the Alabama National Guard.

"I seriously have the best unit. I have the best commander. I have been so incredibly lucky. They have allowed me to have this experience, to be a part of this. It was God's work and everyone here that made this possible, and I want to thank them."

## Sgt. Ted E. Bear's patriotic look



PHOTOS BY JIM HUGHES

Members of the Warrant Officer Candidate School Red Class 21-14 'Assassins' recently took on the mission of painting Sgt. Ted E. Bear in a patriotic theme in honor of Independence Day. The Soldiers took on the challenge and put their artistic skills to the test shortly before their June 30 graduation, and moving on to their careers as warrant officers.

# ARMY FLIER

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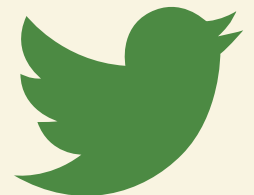
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