



Illinois National Guard remembers first African-American State Command Sergeant Major

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Command Sgt. Major Allen Kirkpatrick, 79, died Aug. 25

SPRINGFIELD - The Illinois Army National Guard lost an influential leader on Aug. 25. Former State Command Sgt. Major Allen Kirkpatrick of Chicago died of natural causes at the age of 79 on Thursday.

Kirkpatrick enlisted May 5, 1955 and served 42 years before retiring in 1997. He was the Illinois Army National Guard's first African-American State Command Sergeant Major, serving as the Guard's top enlisted Soldiers from 1993 to 1997.

"He was a great mentor. He has always been a guy who has impacted people's careers and was very well liked," said retired Command Sgt. Major Odarrell Pennington of Chicago.

Pennington enlisted in 1971 and was part of the Illinois Army National Guard's 1-178th Infantry Battalion in Chicago.

"His motto was 'Good to go,'" Pennington said. "He wanted to ensure Soldiers did everything they could to get the job done and done right. He was very level-headed and impacted the careers of so many of our Soldiers."

Word of his death traveled fast at Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, the state headquarters for the Illinois National Guard. Soldiers began to reminisce about the type of person and leader Kirkpatrick was.

"He was a star. He loved the military and loved Soldiers," said Col. (retired) Ray Perry of Springfield, Illinois. Perry worked with Kirkpatrick for many years in different capacities. "Everyone looked up to him. He was a great man and great person."

Perry retired from the Illinois National Guard in 1999 and still works at Camp Lincoln. He said Kirkpatrick always showed an interest in others.

"He made a point of coming to see me once a year after he retired, just to ask about my family and how I am doing," Perry said.

Kirkpatrick helped mold the Illinois Army National Guard into what it is today.

"Command Sergeant Major Kirkpatrick left a legacy of influence on our force," said Brig. Gen. Michael Zerbonia of Chatham, Illinois, the Assistant Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard and commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "He was an inspirational leader to officers and noncommissioned officers alike. He was a great leader and a great man who will be missed, but won't be forgotten."

Command Sgt. Major Bill Middleton of Chicago retired in 2001 and said Kirkpatrick took him under his wing and taught him how to take care of Soldiers.

"He always took the extra step to make you a better person. He was a great guy and an inspiration to troops," Middleton said. "He taught me to rise to the occasion as a

professional. Without him, there probably wouldn't have been a Command Sgt. Major Middleton."

Following retirement, Kirkpatrick stayed active with the military. He was a member of the 8th Infantry Association, National Guard Association of Illinois and American Legion among other military and veterans service organizations.

"I knew him more through my memberships with the Dorie Miller American Legion Post 915 and The 8th Illinois Infantry Association," said Lt. Col. Nick Johnson of Evanston, Illinois. "He served in many leadership positions within both organizations, but most notable to me was as the historian for the 8th. He was a wealth of information to me and could always be counted on to tell the 8th's and battalion's histories to all whom inquired. He often conducted presentations at local high schools about the regiment and African Americans' service within the U.S. military."

The lineage of the Illinois Army National Guard's 1-178th Infantry Battalion goes back to the 8th Infantry Regiment, a highly decorated African-American unit known for its superior service in World War I and World War II.

Funeral arrangements for Command Sgt. Major Kirkpatrick are still pending.