

Awards Ceremony for Specialized Springfield-based National Guard team that deployed to Afghanistan

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SPRINGFIELD - An awards ceremony was held March 3 for six Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers who served in Afghanistan at the Illinois Military Academy at Camp Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois.



The Soldiers, who were part of the Bilateral Embedded Support Team-Afghanistan (BEST-A19), mobilized in May and returned in December, 2017. The troops are from: Rock Island, Hanover Park, New Berlin, Bloomington, Mount Prospect and Bryant, Illinois. The team deployed to Afghanistan and embedded with the Polish Land Forces in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

This unique joint mission enabled Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers to deploy side-by-side with Polish counterparts as part of Task Force White Eagle, the Polish National Support Element supporting the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The task force trained, advised and assisted the Afghan National Defense Security Forces, as well as the National Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior, in an effort to strengthen the security and stability of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

During their rotation, BEST-A19 helped the Polish military expand its force's capability in the region, training them to conduct security missions throughout the area.

"We worked well with our Polish counterparts and made Afghanistan a safer place," said Lt. Col. Corey Wise of Bryant, Illinois, Commander of BEST A19. "I am proud of our team and what we accomplished."

The BEST-A19 Soldiers were selected for the mission based on their experience, training and skills. Members of the team received both U.S., Polish and NATO military awards including the Joint Service Commendation Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal with Bronze Star, Overseas Service Ribbon, Afghanistan NATO Medal and Polish Afghanistan Star.

Illinois National Guard Soldiers have been deploying side-by-side with the Polish Armed Forces in every rotation to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003. It is one of the oldest and largest of the more than 60 partnerships, matching National Guards in each state with other NATO nations.

"Our relationship with our Polish counterparts and the European Command is at an all-time high," said Maj. Gen. Richard Hayes Jr., Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard. "We conduct training events aimed at building readiness with the Polish Armed Forces each year. These are military-to-military security cooperation events that demonstrate a continued commitment to the collective security of Poland, NATO and, of course, the United States."