

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Air Guard announces Outstanding Airmen of the Year

Posted on Tuesday, Mar 29, 2022

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by Vaughn R. Larson, Department of Military Affairs

Airmen from Milwaukee, Appleton, Merrill, Baraboo and Fond du Lac have been recognized as the Wisconsin Air National Guard's Airmen of the Year.

Staff Sgt. Benjamin Wingers, a recently promoted personnel journeyman with the 115th Fighter Wing's Force Support Squadron, is the Airman of the Year. Tech. Sgt. Cole Paulsen, an aerospace control and warning systems craftsman with the 128th Air Control Squadron, is the Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. Master Sgt. Samantha Burrows, intelligence superintendent with the 115th Fighter Wing's Operations Group, is the Senior Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. Master Sgt. Marta Darrow, first sergeant with the 115th Fighter Wing's Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is the First Sergeant of the Year. And 2nd Lt. Cory Corson, a civil engineering officer with the 115th Fighter Wing's Civil Engineering Squadron, is the Company Grade Officer of the Year.

To be named Outstanding Airman of the Year, recipients must consistently demonstrate outstanding job performance, leadership and superior Airmen qualities. These attributes exemplify what is required for the Wisconsin Air National Guard to fulfill its responsibilities as the primary combat reserve of the Air Force, while simultaneously remaining ready to serve the governor in times of emergency.

Wingers, of Milwaukee, said he enjoys working with and helping people, so when he enlisted in 2016 he chose the personnel career field.

“The personnel career field impacts the benefits and entitlements of every service member that is part of the 115th Fighter Wing,” Wingers explained. He is also pursuing a bachelor’s degree in human resources and labor relations.

Paulsen, of Appleton, works to provide radar and datalink monitoring information to pilots in order to communicate the larger battlespace picture. He chose that field because it is at the center of action.

“The energy in the workplace is distinct,” Paulsen explained. “They had to be able to analyze data coming from multiple areas, communicate with pilots and do real-time adjustments.”

Burrows, born and raised in Merrill, joined the Wisconsin Air National Guard in 2018 after spending eight years on active duty. She chose the intelligence field when she enlisted because it seemed like an interesting way to be involved in daily operations and stay informed about world events.

“Our office benefits the organization by providing insight into why we are involved in certain operations,” Burrows said. “We also provide the data needed to keep our unit members safe — more specifically, the pilots when they are operating downrange.”

Darrow began her Wisconsin Air National Guard career as a firefighter with the 115th Civil Engineering Squadron, and the Fond du Lac resident has parlayed those skills into her current civilian job as a firefighter and paramedic with the Madison Fire Department. She has been a first sergeant since 2018.

“I was blessed to be chosen on my first attempt, as it can be a very competitive process,” she said. “It has been incredibly rewarding, but not without its challenges. I’m the sounding board for my members — they need to have a trustworthy person to turn to when they are seeking advice or answers. I am the conduit for them to get the resources they need, given the situation.”

Corson — a New York state native now residing in Baraboo — has been an officer for a little over two years. Prior to that, the civil engineering graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville served for five and a half years as an enlisted Airman in the 115th Fighter Wing.

“During the week, I’m involved in the planning, programming, design, construction,

commissioning, maintenances and rehabilitation of our installation's infrastructure," Corson said. "On drill weekends, I work alongside our [Civil Engineer Squadron] operations flight superintendent to oversee the training and deployment readiness of our flight."

All of this year's Outstanding Airmen recipients said they were honored by the statewide recognition.

"Achieving this recognition provides me with feedback from my leadership that they have confidence in me as an Airman," Wingers said. "I will continue striving to develop as an Airman, and doing my best to help set a positive example for other Airmen around me."

"It is an honor to be recognized, but this is not something I could have accomplished by myself," Paulsen said. "It tells me our group of Airmen are doing the right things to set us up for success — and hopefully they see themselves in this honor."

"It feels great to be recognized for the work that I've done," Burrows said. "I think it shows my coworkers [and] junior enlisted that hard work does pay off."

"I do what should be expected of someone in this position," Darrow said. "Knowing that I competed against other amazing first sergeants makes me want to share this with them as well."

Corson said his peers and mentors helped him learn more about himself and what he was capable of.

"I don't accept this as a personal award," Corson said. "It credits all who have paved the way for me in my journey."

Wingers encouraged other Airmen aspiring to Outstanding Airmen honors to focus on their attitude and an eagerness to learn.

"Every day new opportunities present themselves," Wingers observed. "If you're willing to take the challenges on, then you will grow and develop as an Airman."

Burrows echoed that sentiment.

"It's important to stay humble while continuing to try your hardest to be the best

Airman you can be,” she said. “There will be times when you may feel overwhelmed or bogged down, but if you keep a positive attitude, people will notice.”

Paulsen said being named Outstanding Airman of the Year should not be a goal, but rather a by-product of helping others in the community as well as the service, displaying technical abilities and effectively communicating within the unit.

Darrow said that selflessness, honesty, compassion and the ability to resolve questions are key for first sergeants. She also recommended Airmen interested in the award speak with their supervisors.

“You need to be proficient at your duties, but not everything is job performance,” Darrow explained. “There are things that you can do that are above and beyond your required job duties that make members competitive for such an award.”

Corson said to prioritize people first, do the work that others are not willing to do, and have goals that don’t always fall under the S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound) guidelines.

“Strive for more,” Corson said. “Don’t measure yourself against others. Balance give and take. Practice financial, physical, mental, social and spiritual resiliency.”