

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

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Airmen from Johnson Creek, Portage, Mukwonago, Milwaukee and Minnesota have been recognized as the Wisconsin Air National Guard's Outstanding Airmen of the Year.

Senior Airman Jacob Muchenberger, a command and control battle management operations specialist with the 128th Air Control Squadron at Volk Field, Wisconsin, is the Airman of the Year. Tech. Sgt. Mark Busch, an aircraft flight equipment lead instructor with the 115th Fighter Wing in Madison, is the Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. Senior Master Sgt. Neil Murray, radio frequency branch chief at the 128th Air Control Squadron, is the Senior Noncommissioned Officer of the Year — and was selected by the Enlisted Field Advisory Council Region 4 to compete for the senior noncommissioned officer of the year for the entire Air National Guard. Senior Master Sgt. Ryan Branz is the First Sergeant of the Year. And Capt. William Reece, commander of the 115th Comptroller Flight, is the Officer of the Year.

Muchenberger, a student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, deployed in support of Operations Inherent Resolve and Spartan Shield, where he provided airspace sensor support for 180,000 square miles. This supported approximately 4,000 sorties and assisted in the capture of one high-value target. While deployed he organized 43 morale events, which was instrumental in boosting morale among the 350 deployed Airmen. Muchenberger is also a small business owner.

Tech. Sgt. Mark Busch, has served in the military for 22 years. He transferred from the New York Air National Guard to the Wisconsin Air National Guard in 2012.

"I provide maintenance on life-saving equipment," Busch said. "I also provide continuation training to pilots." This means he instructs aircrews on equipment use, operation and capabilities; aircrew chemical defense training; and aircraft decontamination equipment training. He also trained pilots, aircrew, pararescue, security forces personnel and civilians in survival evasion resistance and escape (SERE) techniques.

Last year, Busch managed and coordinated the flight incentive program, which provided nearly 120 military personnel as well as local dignitaries with a back-seat ride in an F-16 fighter jet. Busch sized and fitted incentive flight personnel with flight equipment to help ensure a safe ride.

"It was an honor to work with multiple people across the Department of Defense over the past year," he said. "I especially enjoyed working with the 115th Security Forces."

Busch, a Minnesota resident, said he would encourage others seeking an Outstanding Airman of the Year nomination to "work hard, help others, and never give up."

Senior Master Sgt. Neil Murray of Johnson Creek, Wisconsin, oversees the radar and radio frequency shops at the 128th Air Control Squadron.

"In simple terms, my teams enable the eyes and ears for pilots and operators," Murray explained.

On the squadron's last deployment, Murray served as superintendent of the 727th Expeditionary Air Control Squadron's Detachment 9. He said many of his team members had to perform tasks outside of their career fields.

"We worked together," he said. "Their skills allowed me to take on additional responsibility at our location, eventually being selected as the base senior enlisted advisor representing both Airmen and Soldiers."

That added responsibility included scheduling leadership development, mental health and resiliency courses and morale, welfare and recreation activities for approximately 350 personnel. He led efforts to build a softball field to boost morale for service members assigned to the forward operating base.

"I believe the largest reason I was nominated was for my team's accomplishments

while deployed,” Murray said.

Murray’s leadership was instrumental in upgrading the infrastructure at a Syrian forward operating base and supporting airdrops.

In his civilian career, Murray is an electrical manufacturer’s representative, and an active member of the Wisconsin Patriot Guard Riders.

Branz, the first sergeant for the 128th Air Refueling Wing, recently deployed with approximately 100 Airmen to Guam for three months — but as a maintainer, his weekday federal technician assignment, not his drill weekend role as first sergeant.

He joined the Wisconsin Air National Guard in 2006 after seven years in the active Air Force. An aerospace ground equipment technician, he became the 128th Air Refueling Wing Maintenance Group first sergeant in 2018, and was promoted to wing first sergeant in 2022.

“This award comes after almost five years of working on the 128th First Sergeant Council,” Branz said. “My predecessor has encouraged me and built me up to be the first sergeant that I am today.”

Branz spearheaded a promotion recognition program for 27 members being inducted into the noncommissioned and senior noncommissioned corps, as well as recognizing 32 junior enlisted promotions in front of their peers. He oversaw the 2022 Junior Enlisted Orientation Program, and trained two additional-duty first sergeants on the extensive planning and execution of this three-day event. He also planned and directed 97 Honor Guard Detail appearances statewide. He is active in his church and works with local Boy Scouts on military customs.

Branz said he would encourage any Airman seeking to exceed in their Air Force career to volunteer.

“Get involved in your base functions,” Branz said. “Join a council or be part of a base team. You are in the driver’s seat — your career will only go as far as you’re willing to push it.”

Capt. William Reece, whose 11-year military service includes six years in the Wisconsin Air National Guard, is responsible for fighter wing resource management, provides fiscal guidance and decision support, and performs a U.S. Property and Fiscal Office function at the 115th Fighter Wing.

Reece said he was surprised to learn he was selected as Company Grade Officer of the Year.

“I approached my new position with the same can-do attitude that is rampant in contingency operations,” he explained. “I encouraged my flight to challenge assumptions and to forge new possibilities, leading our unit to new levels of efficiency, unprecedented resource maximization and contagious enthusiasm.”

The Comptroller Flight’s performance garnered a 115th Fighter Wing Organization of the Year award, and one of its senior noncommissioned officers was a candidate for Wisconsin Air National Guard Outstanding Airmen of the Year, in addition to Reece’s own nomination and selection. While grateful, he said the recognition reflects the mentorship he has received.

“Don’t sweat the awards,” Reece advised. “Recognition comes and goes, but your dedication to the mission and the people around you is yours to perpetuate.”