

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wortham Achievement Award namesake inducted into Wisconsin Army Guard Hall of Honor

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MADISON, Wis. — 1st Lt. Thomas E. Wortham IV was inducted into the Wisconsin Army National Guard Hall of Honor during a joint ceremony Oct. 27 at the Wisconsin National Guard's Joint Force Headquarters.

Wortham was a combat veteran as well as a member of the Chicago Police Department, president of the Cole Park Advisory Council in Chicago, vice president of the Chicago Chapter of the Men of Iota group, and an active member of the Project Jeremiah youth mentoring group. He was tragically killed in Chicago in 2010 fighting off an armed robbery attempt, and the Wisconsin National Guard and the Chicago Police Department each developed an award to honor his legacy.

Selection into the Wisconsin Army National Guard Hall of Honor is one of the highest recognitions the Wisconsin National Guard can bestow upon a former Soldier or, with limited exception for heroic or extraordinary actions, a present member of the organization.

Likewise, the 1st Lt. Thomas E. Wortham IV Achievement Award is given annually to the Wisconsin National Guard Soldier or Airman who best represent the Citizen Soldier ideal through selfless military service and servant leadership in their communities. The ribbon is green for Army and blue for law enforcement, separated by a black stripe signifying a fallen officer.

Brig. Gen. Matthew Strub, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army, shared

some attributes about the young leader who deployed to Iraq in 2004 and again in 2009.

“Those who knew 1st Lt. Wortham during his brief but brilliant career can testify to his courage, integrity and excellence as a combat leader,” Strub said. “I’ve spoken to officers and non-commissioned officers that knew him well. Every single one of them spoke positively about him with fond memories for his selflessness, natural leadership and contagious personality.”

Strub spoke of sensitive security missions Wortham led — he and his Soldiers dressed in civilian gear and driving low-profile vehicles — in southern Iraq during his 2009-10 deployment. Wortham received the Bronze Star for leading more than 200 combat missions. The general relayed details of one such mission from Wortham’s commander on that deployment, Lt. Col. Matthew McDonald, then a captain in the 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry Regiment.

“Minutes before crossing the border, they encountered a convoy traveling on the same route that had just been caught in a fierce ambush,” Strub said. “All their vehicles were thoroughly shot up.”

Wortham collected information from the returning convoy, and then briefed his men.

“Tommy was in control,” Strub said. “Calm and confident — he clearly had the respect of his sergeants and Soldiers as he briefed them, developed the plan, then checked and rechecked their preparation to go into the unknown. He showed no fear in that moment.”

Strub said that McDonald knew Wortham had passed a crucial tests all combat leaders aspire to — his men admired him, and they would follow him.

Wortham joined the Chicago Police Department in 2007, quickly gaining the trust and admiration of his peers and supervisors for his willingness to patrol the most dangerous areas in Chicago’s seventh district.

“By any measure of a military and law enforcement career, Wortham’s star shone brightly,” Strub said. “So many fellow Soldiers who had known him for years only learned after his death of his above-and-beyond service as a citizen.”

Wortham, while off-duty, served as president of the Cole Park Advisory Council, a

community policing organization dedicated to reducing the rising crime in the neighborhood. He organized neighborhood watches and conducted youth interventions to steer youth away from gangs, drugs and violence. He worked to keep local basketball courts open and safe from gang violence. He served as a mentor and positive role model.

“We are forever indebted to Tom,” Strub said.

Wortham’s sister Sandra spoke on behalf of his family.

“Tommy has been gone for quite a while now — it’s been 13 and a half years,” she said. “But the way that you remember him makes us feel like it was yesterday, and we can never thank you enough.”

Sandra said her brother dreamed of serving in the military since childhood, and credited her parents, Carolyn and Thomas E. Wortham III, for developing his character.

“One thing I can take comfort in is, though he did not live a long life, he did exactly what he wanted to,” Sandra said. “Listening to the stories about his time overseas — that was a dream for him.”

She encouraged those serving in the armed forces and in law enforcement to carry on their work.

“Please know that there is nothing society could do without you,” she said. “We count on our service members, we count on our law enforcement members, and Tommy really embodied that mix of citizen and soldier.”

The Wortham family received a certificate of commendation from Gov. Tony Evers as well as a copy of the plaque which will be displayed in the Wisconsin Army National Guard Hall of Honor at Joint Force Headquarters.

The Wisconsin Air National Guard’s Master Sgt. Charles “Earl” Ells, a watch supervisor in the air traffic control tower and radar approach control at Volk Field, is the 2023 recipient of the 1st Lt. Thomas E. Wortham IV Achievement Award.

Brig. Gen. David May, Wisconsin’s deputy adjutant general for Air, introduced Ells and spoke of spending time in the control tower with Ells during a Northern Lightning exercise when more than 70 fighter aircraft taxied onto the runway for

the morning training mission.

“I was having heart palpitations,” said May, a former commander at Volk Field. “But for Earl it was just another day in the office. I was always impressed with how seamlessly he and his controllers were able to adjust to the extreme swings in the operational tempo in our airspace, always keeping our air crews safe.”

Ells also serves as the Camp Douglas village president, where during his tenure he has overseen improvements to Main Street and utilities, won a \$750,000 grant to build a new community center, organized meal delivery for hundreds of elderly village residents, and developed and expanded the village’s Armed Forces Day event.

When Volk Field’s airspace complex was updated in 2019, Ells was part of the effort to engage local pilots to ensure safety.

“If you spend any time in the Camp Douglas area, you will see the good work of Earl Ells,” May said. “He’s a consummate people person with a vision for his community, always focused on making progress and accomplishing tangible things.”

Ells organized informational field trips to Volk Field with the Tomah Area School District, emphasizing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and encouraging military service.

Ells said that, of all the awards he has received during his military career, the Wortham IV Achievement Award means the most.

Speaking without a script, Ells thanked retired Col. Jim Olson and retired Chief Master Sgt. Greg Cullen for their mentorship, and his family for their support. He shared that he is a quarter Native American, and is enrolled in the Bad River Indian Reservation by Ashland, Wisconsin. He closed his comments with a short statement in Ojibwe, which translated as “Many lives strengthened one.”