

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Army Guard recruiter up to the challenge

Posted on Monday, Apr 17, 2023

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Sgt. 1st Class Johnny Ferreira has had many jobs since he was 17 years old — infantryman, military policeman, unit supply specialist, plumber and recruiter — but it may be accurate to say that the Wisconsin Army National Guard has been his livelihood, if not his lifeline.

“I grew up in a rough neighborhood in Milwaukee, and the Guard really unlocked a lot of opportunities for me,” Ferreira said. “So, I decided I would try and provide that same opportunity to others.”

His aptitude in spreading the message about what the Wisconsin Army National Guard has to offer led to Ferreira being named the Wisconsin Army Guard’s recruiter of the year. He subsequently was named the top recruiter in Region 4, which allowed him to vie for top Army National Guard recruiter honors. While he did not achieve that final honor, he said that overall, it was “an awesome experience.”

“My goal is to do what I can to help improve the organization, and winning those awards allowed me to have a bigger voice,” Ferreira said. “When I give my team advice or any recruiters who may be struggling, they are more likely to listen knowing that I have those accomplishments.”

Lt. Col. Shannon Hellenbrand, commander of the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s Recruiting and Retention Battalion, said anyone who knows Ferreira would not be surprised by his recent recognition.

“He is an incredible, humble noncommissioned officer and human being,”

Hellenbrand said, “and we couldn’t be more proud. Sgt. 1st Class Ferreira is not very comfortable in the spotlight, but he deserves this recognition, and his team deserves it, too.

“To be the top recruiter in the state, while holding a direct leadership role, is a major feat,” she continued. “This set him apart from his competitors nationally, most of whom were able to focus on their own accessions mission without an additional leadership role.”

Hellenbrand said Ferreira worked tirelessly to help his team meet their recruiting goals.

“The significance of this win for Wisconsin is intensified, considering the challenging recruiting environment Sgt. 1st Class Ferreira and our recruiting force is facing,” Hellenbrand said.

Those challenges are indeed significant, as every branch of the U.S. military missed its recruiting goals last year.

“The biggest challenge is the lack of propensity to serve,” Ferreira explained, “and finding individuals who are medically qualified. Long gone are the days of post-9/11 levels of patriotism and desire to serve. Even if individuals do have a desire to serve, statistically they will have some sort of medical issue that could prevent or delay them from doing so.”

Ferreira said he meets and overcomes that challenge by relentlessly spreading the word about what the Wisconsin Army National Guard offers, and how it can benefit a person’s future.

“I explain why I joined, in hopes they will be inspired enough to take that leap of faith,” Ferreira said.

He also has become very knowledgeable concerning Army fitness and medical standards, and how to apply for waivers if needed.

“The days of people enlisting after a few days are gone,” Ferreira observed. “We need to be in it for the long game and always be working with multiple people at a time to meet our mission [goals]. Showing up every day and giving it your maximum effort is the only way we will find success in today’s climate.”

Ferreira is a proponent of sharing ideas and best practices, and building other recruiters up.

“My peers are just as dedicated to this mission as I am,” he emphasized. “There are countless people working long, tireless hours trying to find qualified individuals who want to serve. I don’t believe I’m any better or more dedicated than any of them — last year was just my year. Next year could be theirs.”

Despite acknowledging that recruiting is not an easy job, Ferreira said there’s nothing like it.

“I worked with a young man from Africa who had no family here and was about to be homeless when he walked into my office,” Ferreira said. “Fast-forward a year — he graduated basic combat training and advanced individual training, I helped him get his own place, find employment, and complete his driver’s test. He came to my office after all that and said, ‘You saved my life.’”

“For all its ups and downs, moments like that are worth the endless grind of recruiting.”

Ferreira said he also enjoys being a recruiting team leader and watching the people he works with grow and succeed.

“Watching them hit their stride and accomplish their mission is amazing,” he said. “I appreciate all those who still show up day after day to carry their load.”

“Don’t give up,” Ferreira continued. “Stay in the fight, because the lives we impact are why we are here.”