

Well, good evening, everybody, and thank you so very much for being here, it's always odd to listen to my bio being read, and it occurred to me, I think I've been in the military longer than the speaker's been alive. But anyway, so colleagues, distinguished guests, soldiers and airmen of the Vermont National Guard, thank you for giving me some of your valuable time.

Before I continue, I would like to acknowledge our Gold Star families—these are families who have lost their loved ones through hostile action in service to our nation. They know first-hand the price of freedom. And our survivors as well, some of whom have lost their loved ones to aberrant diseases far too early in life, many from exposure to the toxins from open air burn pits. Would you all please stand and be recognized.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize Senator Leahy and his wife Marcelle who have joined us this evening. Senator Leahy is an incredible public servant and an advocate for our Guard. As he is for so very many, Senator Leahy is also a personal friend and mentor. Senator, Marcelle, would you please stand and be recognized.

I sincerely thank you for placing your trust in me to serve as Vermont's Adjutant General. The past six years have been a distinct honor and privilege to lead the most professional organization I have ever been a part of. This is the first time we have been able to present to you a State of the Guard – thank you Madam Speaker, Connor, thank you for setting this up. It is also my last, as I am not seeking another term as Vermont's Adjutant General. It is, however, something I hope future Adjutants General will have

an opportunity to present annually. My reason for being here, in addition to providing you a state of the Guard, is to perhaps let you see what I see every day. I don't have to look very far to find incredible talent, expertise, dedication and goodness in our people. I may have a bias, as I am quite passionate about our organization, but you should be immensely proud of your Vermont National Guard. I would like to tell you a story. A story of opportunity, of remarkable courage, of hope and certainly of challenges – challenges **you** will help us meet and overcome.

As you know, Vermont has a distinct and unique relationship between the National Guard and our legislature. Please know how much I sincerely value and appreciate our work together. We have grown and strengthened our relationship to one of transparency and professional candor; in addition to my committees of jurisdiction, at my request, for the past five and a half years we have had a Vermont National Guard and Veterans Caucus. This facilitates routine, consistent communication with our legislative colleagues. I would like to recognize my committee chairs, Representative Birong and Senator Collamore, and my caucus co-chairs, Representative Hango, Representative Sibilina and Representative Stone, would you please stand and be recognized. Your collegiality, cooperation and friendship are truly something that should be emulated.

Two-thirds of our force are traditional drilling members, normally training one weekend a month and two weeks a year. They pursue a dual career track, working a civilian job while serving part-time. We have incredible, diverse talent in our organization. Our Guard is comprised of

personnel working in many civilian career fields - the trades, education, law and law enforcement, the medical field, college students, cyber security and IT, small business owners, and many more. The Vermont National Guard provides **\$152M in pay and allowances** into the Vermont economy annually. Military retirees add an **additional \$85M**. We have contributed over **\$30M** of military construction funding to Vermont in the past five years, with another **\$77M** projected in the next five years. We are also an educated force, with a significant number of our Soldiers and Airmen pursuing, or who have earned two-year, four-year and advanced degrees. We have many who have earned certificates in the cyber field and in the trades. This legislature, for many of our members, made that possible.

We are working to grow our Guard and the Vermont workforce through our Partnered Recruiting Initiative for Military and Employers – you know we have to have an acronym so we’re going to call it PRIME – which guarantees Guard members, their spouses and working age children an opportunity to interview with our partner employers here in Vermont. We currently have 21 employer partners, five of them pending agreements, **and 61 more in the queue waiting to become partners with the Vermont National Guard.**

Your National Guard has a dual role, unique in our nation, of answering the call here – our domestic mission – and overseas, our federal mission. In my time serving as the Adjutant General, your Guard has responded in times of crisis, answering the call from our Governor. When the nationwide call came for the National Guard to respond to January 6th, with Governor

Scott's approval, we did not hesitate in sending 100 of our guardsmen to our nation's capital within 72 hours.

We were there to respond to the COVID19 pandemic, administering 75,000 vaccines at multiple sites throughout Vermont, and over the course of that COVID summer distributed **3.2 million meals** to Vermonters who are feeling the pinch of hunger. And we did that with our partners in the with our partners in the Vermont Food Bank. In a week, our Guard built a 400-bed alternate care facility to relieve the pressure on our hospitals. While other states did the same, ours was better, and we did it for 10% of the cost of other states.

We were there when Vermonters experienced the devastating flooding across Vermont over two summers, with our Soldiers and Airmen putting themselves in harm's way to save lives alongside our amazing community first responders. They also coordinated with town emergency managers across Vermont to provide expertise, facilitating timely support to communities where it was urgently needed. Our quick reaction force was directly engaged in saving the lives of 19 Vermonters and their pets from rising flood waters. They were there with swift water rescue teams to evacuate dozens more. We have three Soldiers from our flood response team here this evening. SSG James Bordeaux, SGT John Konopka, SFC Niels Huisman would you please stand and be recognized.

For our federal mission, our Soldiers and Airmen deploy to distant places across the world – Europe, Southwest Asia, the Horn of Africa – to

conduct missions often in harsh, austere environments to provide stability and security where there is little to be found.

This past Saturday, I returned from Okinawa, visiting the nearly 300 members of our Air National Guard deployed to the Indo-Pacific region. They are conducting two large scale exercises working alongside our allies and partners, and operating from distant, separate locations in a logistics challenged environment. We have 65 other members of our Air National Guard deployed to multiple combatant commands across the globe in support of ongoing missions.

Our 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team – our mountain brigade - is preparing for an overseas deployment for training next month. Over 1000 Vermont Soldiers will conduct collective training in Greece and in our partner nation of North Macedonia with seven NATO allies, participating as part of a series of annual exercises in European Command over a period of two weeks.

I would like to share a little more about our Vermont Army National Guard Aviators - our Medical Evacuation pilots and air crews. Over two deployments to US Central Command, three years apart, these Army Aviators flew over **900 medical evacuation** missions, and they did that from eight austere locations in southwest Asia. Even working in challenging, contested conditions, flying a complex aircraft in a dangerous environment, our aviators **did not miss a single mission. Not one, for any reason.** That is unprecedented in Army Aviation and speaks to the professionalism and expertise of our Soldiers. What I cannot account for is what our flight medics

experienced in the back of our Blackhawks as they provided medical care to grievously wounded people. Nor can I tell you how many lives they saved. What I **can** tell you is that experience comes home with them. I would like to introduce to you three members of our Army National Guard aviation unit who recently returned from that mission to Central Command. While moving to a bunker to seek shelter from indirect fire, a terminal attack drone impacted and detonated within meters of them before they could get into the bunker, knocking them to the ground. Another active-duty pilot was critically injured in this attack. Disregarding their own blast injuries, these three Vermont National Guard Soldiers immediately rendered aid, placed the wounded Soldier on a Blackhawk and flew him over 200 miles from their base in Erbil to the military hospital in Baghdad, Iraq, saving his life. Once landing in Baghdad, **only** after completing that mission were they grounded as a result of their own injuries. Each of them received the Purple Heart. Major John Lescure, Chief Warrant Officer Nick Fazio, and Sergeant Alex Jarvis, would you please stand and be recognized.

In the spring of 2022, our Air National Guard was asked to fly in support of the NATO air policing mission to counter Russian aggression. Our Air National Guard executed that mission ***with less than 30 days' notice and did it with four fewer C17s – one of our military cargo aircraft - and 100 fewer Airmen than the unit they were replacing.*** That innovation is a hallmark of our Vermont Air National Guard. These Airmen left their families, homes and jobs to answer this short notice call. One of our young women who worked on an aircrew chose to miss her graduation from UVM to go on that mission. That's the level of dedication and loyalty to

each other in our force. I can also tell you about Isabel Murphy, who serves as a Crew Chief for one of our F35s. It's her jet – an **\$89 million** responsibility given to a 25-year-old young woman. Isabel is unable to join us this evening as she is currently deployed to Okinawa, but her hard-earned achievement is certainly worthy of recognition.

As you know, our Guard has three state partners. 33 years with the Republic of North Macedonia, 17 years with the Republic of Senegal, and this May will be three years with the Republic of Austria. These partnerships are important in our work and represent the remarkable impact of our Guard on the international stage. While the foundation is military-to-military, we are growing our partnerships into a whole of Vermont approach, inclusive of commerce, environmental conservation, tourism, apprenticeships and sub-national partnerships between the city of Burlington and Thiess East in Senegal, and the State of Vermont with the Austrian province of Styria in Austria. As you may know, the Vermont National Guard has a longstanding relationship with Norwich University, our Senior Military College – I am truly grateful for this partnership. I had the distinct honor to be in Austria for the signing of an agreement facilitating education exchanges - students and eventually faculty - between Norwich University, and the Austrian Theresian Military Academy. It is my goal to grow this initiative and incorporate other Vermont institutions of higher education into our partnerships. This exemplifies the positive influence of sustained friendships, the continuity of our effort and the simple goodness of our little state. Brigadier General Bill McCullough, Commandant of Cadets at Norwich University, has joined us

this evening. Bill, would you please stand and be recognized. Thank you for your partnership.

While I have many vignettes regarding the success of our partnerships, I will highlight one example. For eight years we have conducted a medical readiness exercise in many regions of Senegal. A year ago in June, we sent 30 of our Air and Army National Guard providers – doctors, nurses, combat medics, and physical therapists – to work in the far southeast of Senegal. They were joined by two Austrian Army doctors and three providers from the New Hampshire National Guard. Working with civilian and military medical providers from Senegal in the cities of Tambacounda, Kedougou and Goudiri, this multinational team saw **791 Senegalese patients in 12 days**. That is how great the need is. Our joint team helped with routine medical issues, labor and delivery, orthopedics, eye exams, hearing and dental work. Our physical therapists helped Senegalese citizens out of their wheelchairs and got them walking for the first time in years. One of our combat medics working in labor and delivery, revived a Senegalese infant at birth, providing lifesaving respirations for that child. That mother will always know it was because of our partnership it was a Vermont National Guard member that saved her baby. That is the goodness of our partnership and our Guard. I do know I simply cannot replicate that experience here. We have several members of that Medical Readiness Exercise team here this evening. LTC Chris Gookin, Lt Col Sarah Davis, TSgt Taylor Johnson, 1st Lt Yainna Hall would you please stand and be recognized.

As I look across our Guard, I am immensely proud of being able to offer opportunities to our underrepresented populations. Many don't know, if someone is in the United States as a lawful permanent resident, if they meet standards, joining our Guard can accelerate their path to citizenship. Our Guard has focused some of our recruiting efforts on these remarkable people, who have a desire to serve our nation. We have Soldiers and Airmen from Ghana, Somalia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bolivia, Jamaica, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya and Haiti. Many of them earned their citizenship through service in our Guard. In the Vermont National Guard, we don't talk about inclusion, we practice it. We are an organization of opportunity for all who meet the standards to serve. I would like to recognize a few of them this evening:

MSgt Mahat Abdullahi, A1C Libass Mbengue, A1C Nastassia Lapham, PFC Raj Gurung, PFC Sumina Parajuli would you please stand and be recognized.

We have also grown opportunities for women in our Guard. At present, I am confident in saying we have more women in senior leadership positions, and more aligned to take on that responsibility, than in any time in our history. They represent a number of firsts. Kelsey Flannery, now a Captain, is unable to join us as she is currently deployed on our mission to the Pacific. She is the ***first woman to ever fly the F35 in the Air National Guard***; Chief Master Sergeant Rolla is the ***first woman to serve as our State Command Chief***; Brigadier General Poirier is the ***first woman ever promoted to the rank of general officer in the Vermont Army National***

Guard. As you know, there can only be one first. I would like to introduce some of our senior leaders with us this evening - BG Tracey Poirier, CMSgt Jillian Rolla, Col Laura Caputo, Command Chief Warrant Officer Melissa Rice, LTC Sarah Palhete, would you please stand and be recognized.

We have addressed the challenge of sexual harassment and sexual assault head on. We have changed the culture of our Guard to one that does not tolerate this behavior. We have rebuilt trust in our processes, followed through with victims of this aberrant behavior, and dealt with perpetrators by holding them accountable for their actions. In 2024, there were two reported incidents of sexual harassment. One was investigated and not substantiated. On the second, substantiated investigation, the battalion commander determined the conduct was so egregious he believed that Soldier should no longer have the privilege of serving. I concurred with that recommendation, and the Soldier was discharged from our Guard. That tells me our culture has changed to one of intolerance for such corrosive behavior.

Regarding sexual assault, in 2024 we had zero reported incidents. This simply would not have been possible without the diligence and hard work of our Sexual Assault Response Coordinators. It is their leadership that has become an example and provided best practices across Guard Nation. Their work has a national impact.

Ms. Nikki Sorrell and Ms. Serena Furnari, would you please stand and be recognized.

I have worked with members of our legislature and our Congressional delegation to address the many problems presented to service members from exposure to open air hazards, burn pits and other toxins. Through our work with our Congressional Delegation, the PACT act is now law, expanding VA health care benefits to Veterans exposed to toxins, establishing presumptive conditions and allowing for Veterans to file for disability compensation **irrespective** of where that toxic exposure occurred.

We have also worked diligently to address suicide and mental health issues for our members, striving to eliminate the stigma associated with getting help. I have presented the American flag to the next of kin at too many funerals for a Soldier or Airman that took their own life. I am on the National Guard Bureau advisory council at the national level, working to find ways to address and prevent suicide. A key element in this is the establishment of our Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce. Our Guard was among the first to complete staffing of this team, building a foundation to understand, analyze and find ways to intercede before issues arise. We, as a state, **must** work to grow the number of mental health providers, find more to take new patients that accept TRICARE – our military health insurance - and attract those who specialize in adjustment disorder, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. I have encouraged those returning from deployments to seek help when needed. 20 years ago, I returned from a very kinetic deployment. Our battalion had 16 of our colleagues killed in action. I was not OK. I sought help, and if I can't talk about **my** experience, how can I expect others to do the same? But we don't have enough providers for me to refer them to. **You** can help us fix that.

This leads me to where I will close. ***The Guard needs your help.*** As you all know, we have a significant recruiting challenge. My job is to provide ready forces to the Governor for homeland missions, and ready Soldiers and Airmen for our federal missions. And while I am working to improve our processes at the national level – refining medical standards, addressing Military Entrance Processing Station bureaucracy, preparing applicants for testing and the rigors of basic training – some of our challenges are much closer to home. Too many people assign a negative connotation to service in our military, in our case our National Guard. I have heard the expression of unfortunate perceptions. “You can do better,” or “Why would you throw your life away.” These comments are not universal, but when they come from a center of influence for a student or young adult, it carries weight. You can help us counter that message. Our Guard provides opportunities for those who have a desire to serve. It is this legislature that creates opportunity for so many people, I ask that you do the same to help us grow our guard. I know we have Vermonters who can serve. It is, of course, a choice. It isn’t for everyone, but the rewards for serving our communities, state and our nation make it incredibly rewarding and certainly impactful. I will always talk about service first. If you don’t have the desire to serve, the benefits don’t matter – and there are many. Affordable health care, dental care, and life insurance; a retirement and investment plan; and because of the efforts of our legislature, an outstanding tuition benefit program. But until we can share the story of our National Guard more effectively, we will remain hard pressed to fill our ranks. You, my centers of influence, can help us do that. I ask that you tell our story to your constituents. Send them our

six-month update, encourage them to go to our open houses, and help educate them about what it means to be a member of this incredible organization. Imagine, if each of you here this evening were to refer one person to join our National Guard, I think that would go a long way to filling our critical vacancies. It would also provide employment and education opportunities for hundreds of Vermonters. The good news is, once someone joins our Guard, they tend to stay – our retention rate remain very high. When you join the Vermont National Guard, you truly become a member of a family, a member of something very special. We are no longer a mystery, come see us. We are, after all, your Guard and we have a lot to offer.

But I know we can do more to incentivize keeping our talent here in Vermont, and to grow our Guard by making our state attractive to military retirees and prior-service military members. Further, we have an obligation to honor our military survivors, whose loved ones gave their lives in service to our nation. We need to help them stay in the state they love so dearly.

The state of our Guard is strong – but with ***your*** help, we can become even stronger and grow our capabilities and our capacity to continue serving Vermont, and our nation well into the future.

As a reminder, a public service announcement, we are hosting a legislator day this Saturday, April 5, starting at 9:00 AM at the Vermont Air National Guard base in South Burlington. I sincerely thank all of you for your service and for the opportunity to present this address to you this evening. Your time is important, thank you very much for being here. I invite you all to

join us this evening in the Cedar Creek Room for a reception and to meet some of our amazing Guard members. God bless and thank you again.