

The Luke Air Force Base Thunderbolt

“We train the world’s greatest fighter pilots and combat ready Airmen”

October, 2024
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FEATURE



Senior Airman Katelynn Jackson
LUKE’S OUTSTANDING AIRMAN OF THE YEAR
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Luke AFB celebrates the 77th Air Force birthday

By Senior Airman
Mason Hargrove

56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

The 56th Fighter Wing hosted the 77th Air Force birthday, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The event celebrated the Air Force’s 77th anniversary and provided an opportunity for Airmen to reflect on its history and future.

The evening featured an array of traditions and presentations, offering attendees a chance to honor the Air Force’s history while engaging in ceremonies that highlighted its core values and legacy.

The evening began with an opening narration followed by the arrival of the official party. U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Jason Shaffer, 56th Fighter Wing command chief, gave the opening remarks.

“A championship team doesn’t win because of one star player. It’s about every person giving their best, working together, and supporting each other,” said Shaffer. “What makes the Air Force strong is the dedication and hard work of every Airman, whether they’re out there flying or making sure the mission gets done behind the scenes.”

A video presentation on the history of Luke AFB was shown, followed by a group of enlistees taking the oath of enlistment and the traditional cake-cutting ceremony.

Additionally, the event featured activities such as a mechanical bull riding competition, axe throwing and an obstacle course.



U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Mason Hargrove

U.S. Air Force Col. David Berkland (left), 56th Fighter Wing commander, cuts the cake with Airman Preston Jones, 56th Logistics Readiness Squadron vehicle maintenance apprentice, at the 77th Air Force Ball, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The evening featured an array of traditions and presentations, a video presentation on the history of Luke AFB was shown, followed by a group of enlistees taking the oath of enlistment and the traditional cake-cutting ceremony.

The evening concluded with closing remarks from U.S. Air Force Col. David Berkland, 56th FW commander.

“As we look back on the past 77 years, the one thing that stands out is our people. Our strength has always come from

the dedication of every Airman,” said Berkland. “The future is in good hands because of the incredible work being done today.”



LEFT: U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Mickaella Badilla, 56th Force Support Squadron assignment counselor, rides a mechanical bull at the 77th Air Force Ball, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Attendees honored the Air Force’s traditions and history while engaging in activities which bolstered morale and highlighted its intra-service camaraderie.



U.S. Air Force Honor Guard members prepare to present the colors, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. During this event, Airmen were able to gather and celebrate the 77th birthday of the U.S. Air Force a few days prior to its official birthday of Sept. 18.



U.S. Air Force Col. David Berkland, 56th Fighter Wing commander, swears in enlistees at the 77th Air Force Ball, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

LEFT: U.S. Air Force Airman Joseph Rivera Muniz, 63rd Fighter Squadron aviation resource manager, receives food at the 77th Air Force Birthday, Sept. 13, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

Luke Air Force Base Thunderbolt

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56th FSS hosts a Deployed Family Fair

By Senior Airman
Mason Hargrove

56th Fighter Wing

The 56th Force Support Squadron hosted a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. It welcomed 37 spouses and family members of deployed Airmen to connect with vital resources available during their loved ones' time away.

The event featured booths from various base organizations, including the Military & Family Readiness Center, Youth Programs, and the Chapel, offering valuable information and support.

"Families experience mental, emotional, physical, and financial challenges, along with the difficulty of being separated from their loved one during deployments and remote tours," said U.S. Air Force Master



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Giovonna Sumter, Military & Family Readiness Center non-commissioned officer in charge, speaks at a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.



LEFT: A U.S. Air Force Airman assigned to Luke Air Force Base pets a petting zoo duck at a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke AFB, Arizona.



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Mason Hargrove

A U.S. Air Force family orders snow cones at a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The Deployed Family Fair offered spouses and families of deployed Airmen information on available programs and support services. The event featured booths of various organizations and family-friendly activities including bounce houses, a petting zoo, and bumper cars.

Sgt. Giovonna Sumter, 56th FSSM&FRC non-commissioned officer in charge. "We want our families to know they are not alone; we care, and we are their family."

At the MFRC, they aim to provide information, resources, and referrals to help families through any hardships. The Hearts Apart Program is designed to support spouses and family members of Airmen who are deployed or away from home station for more than 30 days.

"The spouse at home may feel isolated and overwhelmed during a deployment," said Christy Casper, 56 FSS M&FRC team lead. "M&FRC organizes Hearts Apart events like the Thunderbolt Dinner Club and fun days out in the hope to provide families with opportunities to build community

and lean on each other for support and connection."

The fair concluded with family-friendly activities, including bounce houses, a petting zoo, and bumper cars. The evening offered a range of activities for the children while their parents

engaged with the support resources available.

Events like these strengthen relationships between base organizations and the families they serve, fostering collaboration that enhances the support available to the community.



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Gregory Dixon (left), 56th Equipment Maintenance Squadron conventional maintenance support supervisor, and his spouse, speak with organization booths at a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.



Linda Rainey, Military & Family Readiness Center advocate, serves cotton candy at a Deployed Family Fair, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

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Against the tide: SrA Khromiak's Air Force story

By Senior Airman
Katelynn Jackson

56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

As Mykhailo Khromiak walked alone along the beach shore, his steps sank into the cool, damp sand before being washed away by the gentle caress of the crashing waves. The sun was setting in Ocean City, Maryland, casting a sky of fading amber and lavender light. The golden sun dipped into the sea, a shimmering canvas of indigo and silver mirroring the evening sky.

The peaceful glow above was a sharp contrast to the turmoil clouding Khromiak's mind—the agonizing wait for his green card and the distant unrest in his home country, Ukraine, loomed over his thoughts like a storm.

He often walked the sands of this beach when the unknown weight of the future for himself and his family in Ukraine threatened to overwhelm him.

As the last rays of sunlight melted into the sea, Khromiak closed his eyes and whispered into the soft breeze, "One day, things will be different."

He couldn't have known, of course, just how different things would be one day. "If you had told me 10 years ago that I would be recognized as one of the 12 Outstanding Airmen of 2024," said Khromiak, now a staff sergeant select in the U.S. Air Force, "I would have told you that you were crazy."

Khromiak's story is one of perseverance and selflessness, overcoming the odds of his circumstances and approaching life's problems with positivity. It is also a tale that begins long before he ever stepped foot on U.S. soil.

Born in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, in 1993, Khromiak lived in a small apartment with his parents, grandfather, and older brother. He recalls how the culture in Ukraine differed drastically from that of Western countries, where many dealings involved bribes. The prevailing mentality was that if you weren't sharing, you were against others.

"I am so grateful my parents never took the route of bribery, even though it would have been easier," Khromiak said. "They raised us with a different mindset—fairness and honesty."

From a young age, Khromiak knew he wanted more for his life than what Ukraine could offer. When he was nine, his family bought a television, and he saw a film starting with the New York City skyline.

"I told my grandpa that one day I would live there," Khromiak said. "He smiled and told me that if I wanted to, then I would."

In ninth grade, he saw an ad for a foreign exchange program to the U.S. "My grandpa called me to the TV, where a girl from the local university was being interviewed about the program," Khromiak said. "Two years later, I learned about the requirements: you had to be a full-time student and pay \$2,500."

At that time, \$2,500 was an unreachable amount for Khromiak's family. His mother was a baker, and his father worked at a gas station. Together, they earned just over \$500 a month.

After graduating high school in 2010, Khromiak attended the local university



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Katelynn Jackson

U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Mykhailo Khromiak, 56th Logistics Readiness Squadron ground transportation operator, inspects a vehicle, Aug. 6, 2024 at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Khromiak served as the lead linguist and translator for 12 months in support of Ukraine relief efforts for the 603rd Operations Center, coordinating multinational relations between the Department of Defense, Ukraine, and NATO partners.



Courtesy photo

U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Mykhailo Khromiak (middle right), 56th Logistics Readiness Squadron ground transportation operator, smiles for a photo with his wife, Yordana Khromiak (middle left), and their family on their wedding, Jan. 17, 2024, in Peoria, Arizona. Khromiak served as the lead linguist and translator for 12 months in support of Ukraine relief efforts for the 603rd Operations Center, coordinating multinational relations between the Department of Defense, Ukraine, and NATO partners.



Courtesy photo

U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Mykhailo Khromiak, 56th Logistics Readiness Squadron ground transportation operator, dances in his home as a child in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. Khromiak got his green card in America in 2019 and enlisted into the U.S. Air Force in 2020.

in Uzhhorod on a math scholarship, which provided him \$100 a month as long as he maintained a GPA above 4.0 out of 5.0.

After a year, he sought a summer work program in the U.S. He found a reputable company in Kyiv, a 16-hour train ride from Uzhhorod.

"I made a deal with my parents," said Khromiak. "I would save enough to pay half of the \$2,500 fee, and they would cover the other half which I would repay from the money I earned working in America."

He saved for 18 more months to afford the program fee. After paying, he interviewed for positions in Alaska and Kentucky, but both were shut down by the State Department. He was then offered a final opportunity in Ocean City to work as a cashier at an oceanside restaurant called Seacrets Jamaica USA.

"They called me with the offer and told me I had 10 minutes to decide," Khromiak said. "I decided to go for it and called them back."

The program managers told him he had 48 hours to be in Kyiv for the interview. With a 16-hour train ride ahead, he and his mother rushed to buy tickets.

"It was my last shot to come to the U.S.

through that program, and I was so nervous," Khromiak said. "My selling point was my mathematics scholarship to prove I was good with numbers and could count cash for the restaurant."

Khromiak met the employer's representative, Christine. "I was so scared my hands were shaking, but she assured me that it would be okay," he said. Christine gave him her card and told him to call her when he landed in the States.

Khromiak visited the U.S. for the first time in 2012. "One of the first things I learned for my job was to smile," he said with a laugh. "In Ukraine, nobody smiles, otherwise people think something is wrong." He realized the culture in the U.S. was drastically different from his home country. Making friends and being treated equally was a revelation.

Khromiak saved \$2,000 that summer to bring back home. Upon returning, the dean at his university tried to extort money from him, knowing he had earned money in the U.S. "He took away my scholarship because I didn't give him any money," Khromiak said. "Having returned from America, I knew things could be better, and I didn't

want to feed into their corrupt system anymore."

Khromiak fought for his scholarship, even appealing to the university president, but to no avail.

Khromiak knew he needed to return to America. "When it came to my future in Ukraine, I realized society would only care about me if I had money," he said. "I was determined to get a work visa to come back to the States."

He returned to America in May 2013. With a strong connection to Christine, he received the necessary paperwork to return to Ocean City. In July, he learned he could extend his work visa through winter, and he eagerly accepted.

On the day he was set to fly back to Kyiv, his mother and cousin begged him to stay in the U.S. They feared he would be killed due to the Euromaidan protests.

"Students like me were dying while fighting for Ukraine," Khromiak said. "I felt I should be with them, but my mother was

Thunderbolts to Thunderbirds

By Senior Airman
Jakob Hambricht

56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

Two Airmen currently assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing, Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, were selected to join the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, the Thunderbirds, for the 2025-2026 show seasons.

Joining the Thunderbirds will be U.S. Air Force Capt. Nick Belinski, 309th Fighter Squadron instructor pilot, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Christian Martinez, 56th Fighter Wing protocol specialist.

"It's kind of intimidating knowing I'm going to have to fly closer to other jets than I've ever flown before," Belinski explained. "Being on the team is going to be a bit more challenging than what I have been doing on a daily basis."

Originally from Aspen, Colorado, Belinski grew up less than four hours from the U.S. Air Force Academy where he would eventually earn his degree and commission. Belinski looks forward to the opportunities that being on the Thunderbirds will bring.

"It's a great opportunity to help engage with the public and showcase what we do for a living," Belinski shared. "I've been fortunate to fly all around the world, but most of that was happening quietly. So, to



U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Mason Hargrove
U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Christian Martinez, 56th Fighter Wing protocol specialist, stands in front of an F-16 Fighting Falcon, Aug. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

be a part of the team that gets to share that mission and share what our capabilities are makes for a great next chapter for me."

Martinez, who will be working in scheduling, credits the opportunity to join the Thunderbirds as the result of a lot of work and effort. He hails from Orlando, Florida, and has served in the Air Force for more than eight years.

"This is my second time applying for the

team actually," said Martinez. "When they told me no the first time, I knew I had to keep working day in and day out to get better, so that when I could apply again, I would stand a much better chance of getting in, and it all worked out in the end."

Martinez also credits his time at Luke AFB in teaching him how to be flexible and resilient in his career.

"My wife is also active duty," Martinez shared. "So, we've had to deal with things like deployments, being separated, and living in different states. Through experiences like that, we've both learned how to rely on different support systems in our lives, and how to stand tall when life gets tough."

The Thunderbirds perform more than 70 demonstrations a year, showcasing the professionalism and precision required of Airmen around the globe.

"Being on the Thunderbirds, I'm going to be constantly on the road traveling to different parts of the world, while constantly changing sceneries," said Martinez. "What I've learned here at Luke has helped shape me to who I am today and who I will be once I join the team."

In 1953, the Thunderbirds officially activated as the 3600th Air Demonstration Team at Luke AFB. More than 70 years and 4,000 demonstrations later, Luke



U.S. Air Force Capt. Nick Belinski, 309th Fighter Squadron instructor pilot, prepares his F-16 Fighting Falcon for flight, Aug. 26, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Belinski has been selected to join the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds for the 2025-2026 show seasons, where he will be the narrator and advance pilot for the demonstration team.

AFB Airmen are still supporting that legacy.

The selection of Belinski and Martinez highlights the exceptional caliber of training provided at Luke AFB, demonstrating the strength of its Airmen and dedication to excellence. Their success is a testament to Luke AFB's mission of training the world's greatest fighter pilots and combat-ready Airmen.

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944th FW commander rallies Airmen, sets focus on mission-ready future

By Senior Airman Alexis Orozco

944th Fighter Wing

The 944th Fighter Wing Commander, U.S. Air Force Col. Todd “Riddler” Riddle, addressed over 600 members of the wing during a quarterly commander’s call at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, Sept. 7, 2024, focusing on the vital importance of readiness, available resources, and building connections.

Riddle began by stressing the collective responsibility of every Airman in ensuring the success of the 944th FW’s mission, which is to Forge Combat Airmen to Fly, Fight and Win. He reiterated that everyone plays a critical role, emphasizing that the wing’s readiness directly supports not only national security but also the well-being of each member.

“We find a way to win, and we find a way to make the people around us better,” Riddle remarked, underscoring the importance of every Airman’s contribution to mission success.

Readiness for a global mission

Throughout the commander’s call, Riddle highlighted the wing’s upcoming participation in major exercises such as Desert Hammer 25-1, scheduled for November 2024. This exercise will test the wing’s preparedness and ability to respond to real-world



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Alexis Orozco

U.S. Air Force Col. Todd “Riddler” Riddle, 944th Fighter Wing commander, addresses more than 600 Reserve Citizen Airmen during a commander’s call at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, Sept. 7, 2024. Riddle discussed the importance of preparedness, personal resources available to Airmen, and fostering connections within the unit to ensure mission success.

scenarios in a deployed environment. Riddle made it clear that maintaining readiness is an ongoing effort that involves consistent training and adapting to the evolving demands of global competition.

“We must remain prepared for the tasks ahead, whether that means deployments, exercises, or ensuring that we have the skills and mindset necessary to succeed in today’s complex global environment,” Riddle explained.

This message of preparedness resonated with many Airmen, including Senior Airman Damaris Molina of the 944th Aeromedical Staging Squadron, who was recognized

during the call for her achievement as a distinguished graduate of Airman Leadership School.

Reflecting on the commander’s emphasis, she noted, “We are all working on different exercises so that we can be ready for deployment.”

Resources to support the force

In addition to readiness, Riddle emphasized the wealth of resources available to support Airmen and their families. As part of this focus, his message included discussions on financial counseling, mental

health resources, and family support services. Riddle highlighted that maintaining personal and financial well-being is just as crucial to mission readiness as operational preparedness.

He noted how the Military & Family Readiness has access to a free financial consultation to help Airmen manage budgets, loans, and retirement investments. Riddle also pointed to the work of Dr. Kyrie Conseen, 944th FW director of psychological health, who provides mental health services and consultation to ensure that all members have the support they need.

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Luke AFB hosts 24-hour POW/MIA run



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jakob Hambright

U.S. Air Force Airmen assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing and U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the Phoenix Army Reserve Center participate in the 24-hour POW/MIA run, Sept. 19, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Participants ran with the POW/MIA flag for 24 hours straight, while the names of prisoners of war and those missing in action were read aloud.



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jakob Hambright
Retired U.S. Air Force Col. Thomas Kirk, former prisoner of war, gives remarks during the POW/MIA retreat ceremony, Sept. 20, 2024 at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Kirk, a former F-105 Thunderchief pilot, spoke of his 1,964 days as a POW after being shot down over North Vietnam. On National POW/MIA Recognition Day, the United States reaffirms its commitment to bring home those who are still missing and seek answers for the families of the missing.



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman Belinda Guachun-Chichay
U.S. Air Force Airmen assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing participate in the 24-hour POW/MIA run, Sept. 19, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Volunteers ran or walked with the POW/MIA flag for 24 hours straight, while the names of prisoners of war and those missing in action were read aloud.



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jakob Hambright

U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II aircraft assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing conduct a missing man formation flyover during the POW/MIA retreat ceremony, Sept. 20, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The 56th FW capped off its 24-hour vigil with a retreat ceremony, featuring a missing man formation flyover, as well as the retirement of the POW/MIA flag used during the vigil. The missing man formation recognizes those service members who have yet to return home, whether they are a prisoner of war, missing in action, or have given their life in service to the nation.



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jakob Hambright

U.S. Air Force Airmen assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing and U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the Phoenix Army Reserve Center participate in the 24-hour POW/MIA run, Sept. 19, 2024, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

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across the world begging me to stay.”

Two friends he met at church in Maryland offered him a place to stay and helped him file for political asylum. “My parents continued to ask me to stay in the States,” Khromiak said. “They told me they couldn’t afford to lose me, and due to the conflicts, they would be unable to take me home from the airport in Kyiv.”

Khromiak waited six months for an interview with the Department of Homeland Security and applied for temporary work authorization but ran out of money to support himself. His friends stocked his refrigerator, bought him groceries and clothing, and treated him like family.

“The kind of selfless support I received in the U.S. wasn’t something I could have had in Ukraine, not even from my own cousins,” Khromiak said, his eyes glistening. “I would tell my mom about the kindness people showed, and she would cry in disbelief.”

Khromiak was granted his temporary work visa and began working three jobs.

“I was continuously in the dark about my future while waiting on my green card,” he said. “At the same time, the situation in Ukraine wasn’t changing.”

Spending his twenties in the U.S., Khromiak began to feel that America was becoming his true home. “The development of the person I became happened in America,” he said. “I was born in Ukraine, but this place had become more of my true home.”

It was during these years he would walk the beaches of Ocean City and pray.

Five years after filing for political asylum, Khromiak received his green card on Halloween 2019. “They approved my green card, and I did the most American thing I could to celebrate,” said Khromiak, the corners of his mouth pulling wider. “I went to McDonald’s.”

With his green card, he visited his family in Ukraine on January 1, 2020. “It felt like a visit,” said Khromiak. “Not like going home.”

Despite the preciousness of seeing his family again, he said the people who took care of him in the U.S. had also become his family. “With how much they supported and advocated for me,” Khromiak said, “I jump at any chance to help others because I’ve been helped a lot.”

It was this mindset of wanting to give back and serve the country that had supported him, that led Mykhailo Khromiak to join the U.S. military. After exploring his options in the reserves and praying extensively about his decision, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 2020.

“I wanted to either work in finance or intelligence,” Khromiak said. “Even though I scored high enough on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to qualify for both, I had a very short list of jobs to choose from because I was not yet a U.S. citizen.”

He had 10 jobs to choose from. Khromiak said that because of his experience in one of his jobs as an Uber driver while waiting for his green card, he chose to work in ground transportation. Less than a year after receiving his green card, Khromiak left for basic military training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, in 2020.

“The hardest part of basic training was the language barrier,” Khromiak said. “The military training instructors would call cadence in a way that was very hard for me to understand.”

Despite the language challenge, Khromiak completed BMT as an honor graduate.



Courtesy photo

U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Mykhailo Khromiak (left), 56th Logistics Readiness Squadron ground transportation operator, smiles for a photo with his wife, Yordana Khromiak, July 2024 on their honeymoon in Venice, Italy. Khromiak served as the lead linguist and translator for 12 months in support of Ukraine relief efforts for the 603rd Operations Center, coordinating multinational relations between the Department of Defense, Ukraine, and NATO partners.

He then attended the Ground Transportation Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where he graduated as a distinguished graduate.

“I had put Luke Air Force Base, in Arizona at the top of my wish list for my first duty station,” Khromiak said. “I couldn’t believe it when I checked my orders and saw that was exactly where I was going.”

As a ground transportation specialist, Khromiak was responsible for conducting large and small-scale mission support, cargo and passenger movement, personal security details, distinguished visitor support, and other protocol services.

Khromiak became involved in the local community and discovered that his priest and his family had also immigrated from Ukraine.

In 2021, Khromiak was advised to take the Ukrainian language aptitude test, which could lead to compensation or special duties. He achieved the highest score on the Ukrainian Defense Language Proficiency Test at Luke AFB, but he didn’t expect much to come of it.

By early 2022, Khromiak had settled into life in Arizona. He bought his first home, excelled at work, and started dating his priest’s daughter, Yordana, on February 14.

Ten days later, Russia invaded Ukraine.

The attack was the largest on a European country since World War II, resulting in thousands of casualties among Ukrainian civilians and service members.

“It was still palm trees and sunshine here in Arizona for everyone else,” Khromiak said, his usual smile fading. “But my world had flipped upside down in an instant.”

In early March following the attack in Ukraine, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III ordered an additional deployment of 500 U.S. military personnel and key enablers to locations across Europe.

Khromiak was among those 500 Airmen.

Khromiak’s supervisor informed him he had been hand-selected for short-notice orders to an undisclosed location in Europe. No one in his chain of command knew where

he would be going or what he would be doing. They only knew that if he accepted, he would have to leave the following month.

“I was torn between two worlds,” Khromiak said. “My life here, with my new home and relationship that meant so much to me, and my duty to both the U.S. and my home country.”

Khromiak said that senior leadership told him that this was his chance to serve both of his countries. After their conversation, Khromiak knew he would do whatever was needed.

“The news that I would be leaving so soon with no certainty of where I would be going was hard for Yordana,” Khromiak said. “But she was willing to wait for me, even though our relationship had just begun.”

On the day before Easter 2022, Khromiak flew from Arizona to Maryland for an 18-hour layover before traveling to Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to serve at the 603rd Air Operations Center. While deployed, Khromiak served as the lead linguist and translator, coordinating multinational relations between the Department of Defense, Ukraine, and NATO partners.

He advanced real-time Ukrainian language support, developed a \$273 million translation guide, highlighted hostile activity from enemy targets, and acted as the critical command and control liaison for a 24/7 Air Domain Awareness Cell.

“I was working with high-ranking officers as a junior enlisted Airman,” Khromiak said. “It was nerve-racking at first, but I soon learned that we were all part of one team, one fight.”

He led a diverse 10-member team of non-commissioned officers, senior non-commissioned officers, and company grade officers, alerting forces to 2,000 air threats and 1,500 impending ballistic missiles, safeguarding 43 million lives across 24 regions.

“The hardest thing about the deployment wasn’t working in a 24/7 operation or not having my own shower,” Khromiak said. “It was being away from Yordana.”

He made sure to call her whenever pos-

sible and sent flowers monthly, counting the days until they could be reunited.

When the countdown reached 30 days until they would be together again, senior leadership asked to speak with him. “They told me that no one else could fill my role once I left,” Khromiak said. “They needed me and asked me to stay another six months.”

Though he was committed to his duties, Khromiak told them he needed to make a phone call first. “As soon as I could call Yordana, I told her to add 180 days to her 30-day countdown,” Khromiak said. “She didn’t speak to me for three days after that.”

He felt torn, having chosen his duty over the girl he loved. He accepted the new orders only on the condition of being able to return home for a visit. His leadership allowed him to take two weeks of leave before returning to the 603rd AOC.

“I surprised her,” Khromiak said, his eyes bright. “I left flowers and a cake outside her door and texted her that I had something delivered to her house. When she stepped outside, there I was.”

The weeks Khromiak spent at home with her and her family were priceless to him. Although saying goodbye again was difficult, he returned with renewed determination.

During the rest of his tour, he received the Air Force Commendation Medal, was selected for the 56th Fighter Wing’s top Below-the-Zone promotion and received coins from Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Joanne Bass, U.S. Air Forces in Europe leadership, and received the Chief of Intel coin.

After 12 months deployed to Germany, Khromiak returned to Luke AFB in April 2023.

Back home, he continued his duties as a ground transportation specialist and worked stateside to continue providing Ukrainian language support.

Just a few months later, in the summer, he proposed to Yordana. “I originally planned to wait until Christmas,” Khromiak said. “But I knew she was the one. Who else would have waited a year for me?” They married in January of the following year and saved money for their honeymoon until July, when they visited 13 different countries.

“Two weeks into our vacation, we were having dinner in Venice when I got a call from the Air Education Training Command deputy commander and AETC command chief,” Khromiak said. “That was the moment I found out I had been recognized as one of the Air Force’s 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year.”

The Outstanding Airman Program annually recognizes 12 enlisted members as the service’s top enlisted members for superior leadership, job performance, community involvement, and personal achievements.

Even through this incredible honor, Khromiak stays humble and said for him, his service was never about getting an award. “Saving lives was so rewarding,” Khromiak said. “That has been the greatest honor above everything else.”

Khromiak’s journey from walking alone on the beaches of Ocean City to working on global defense missions embodies the resilience and dedication that will drive the USAF’s success in the competition for global air superiority.

His unwavering commitment and character not only set an exceptional standard for Airmen to strive for, but also serves as a beacon of hope for those who too, yearn for a different life.



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JWV speaker helps Veterans 5-9

Founder and president of Veterans 5-9, Marcus Lamar Brown, will explain how the organization helps Veterans after hours when he speaks to Jewish War Veterans Post 619 on Oct. 20. The JWV meets at Bradford Room A at Oakwood Country Club 24218 S. Oakwood Blvd in Sun Lakes.

A "Meet & Greet," with free lox and bagels, coffee, and doughnuts starts at 9:30 a.m. The speaker follows at 10 a.m. All are welcome.

The Veterans 5-9 provides nighttime and weekend support services to Veterans currently in the military or exiting soon and reintegrating from incarceration. Veterans 5-9 provides resources for substance abuse, mental health, food, lodging, and transportation, which are normally only available on weekdays during normal business hours. When the 5 o'clock hour/weekend hits, service providers aren't available, and

Veterans are left to fend for themselves.

To help accomplish their mission, Veterans 5-9 partners with various ground-level organizations. "All of our Partners have a wealth of resources and talented members ready to help," said Brown.

"Our streamlined process means Veterans are assisted immediately and not just told to call another number. The overall goal is to immediately stop the emergency, and work on long-term resources to ensure you get over the hump," Brown tells the vets.

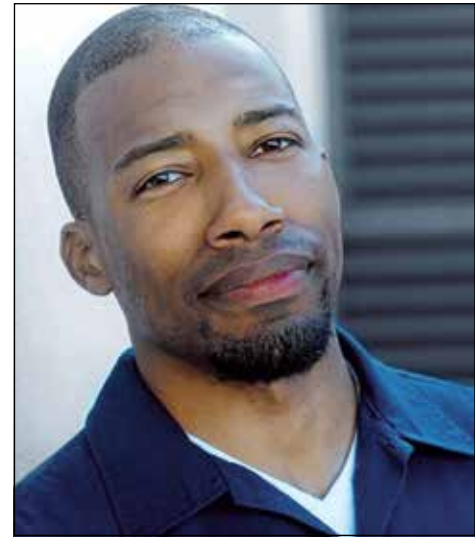
To ensure the Veteran has a strong support group, Veterans 5-9 provides a comprehensive follow up system to provide continuity as they stabilize and rebuild their lives.

Brown provided a perfect example of how 5-9 works. He was at a spring training game when he got a call from a constable who had to evict a Veteran. "The constable gave him our number to call saying we might be able

to assist him. I immediately left the game, put this now-homeless Veteran in a hotel for a night and provided food for himself and his cat. The next day we assisted with paying all eviction fees to get them right back into the same apartment. This Veteran was very appreciative that he was not left behind," said Brown.

Marcus Brown is a Casa Grande, Arizona, native who grew up playing sports and hoping one day to make it to the Olympics for track and field. After 9/11, he decided to join the Marine Corps in 2004, completing two tours to the Middle East as a part of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. "I was taught to never leave anyone behind," claims Brown. "Our work is so impactful because we work to accomplish this every day," he said.

JWV Post 619 meets the third Sunday of every month from September to June, and



Courtesy photot

members include a wide range of religious affiliations who participate in philanthropic activities helping veterans of all faiths. To learn more about JWV activities and membership, contact Arthur Uram, 702-884-4175, uramarthur@gmail.com

FUTURE

(from Page 5)

Fostering connection, community

Riddle further stressed the importance of building strong connections within the wing to foster unity and resilience. He pointed out that the diverse backgrounds and experiences of reservists strengthen the wing, encouraging an environment where everyone feels valued and supported.

"The biggest takeaway from the commander's call is mak-

ing sure we're all connected so we can continue to be ready together," said U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Valencia Ganir, a dental noncommissioned officer in charge with the 944th Medical Squadron, emphasizing the power of teamwork and unity in sustaining the wing's success.

For newer members, such as U.S. Air Force Airman First Class Marianna Frasier, this sense of connection and belonging was quickly felt. "It feels like you're a part of something bigger," Frasier shared, reflecting on the camaraderie she experienced during her second Unit Training Assembly.

Looking forward

As the commander's call concluded, Riddle's message was clear: the 944th FW is not only prepared to meet the challenges of the future but also committed to ensuring that every member is supported. Whether through mission readiness, personal resources, or strong team connections, the wing remains focused on resilience and excellence.

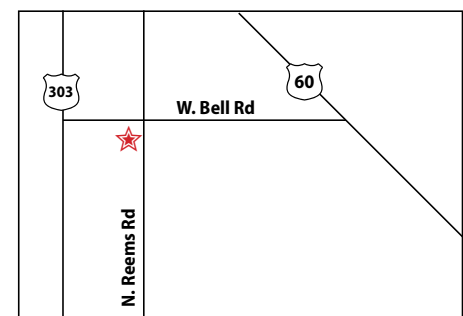
"We are always ready — ready to deploy, ready to protect, and ready to win," Riddle said, closing his remarks with a confident outlook on the wing's future.

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Chaplain's thoughts ...

The Secret Sauce to Epic Relationships: A Spiritual Foundation

Chaplain (Capt.) Jeff Jeff Rybold

56th Fighter Wing

Relationships are fun, right? You've got love, laughter, date nights, and maybe a little bickering over what to watch on Netflix. But if you really want your relationship to stand the test of time (and bad Wi-Fi), there's one thing that can take it to the next level—a spiritual foundation. And no, this doesn't mean you both have to join a monastery. It's all about connecting on a deeper level.

So, what exactly is a spiritual foundation?

It's like the emotional superglue that keeps relationships rock-solid. Having a common spiritual foundation means you and your partner share and respect each other's core beliefs and values. Whether you're into worship, meditation, prayer, or just believe in good vibes, having that spiritual connection makes everything else become more meaningful.

Why you need this secret sauce in your relationship?

1. You Level Up Your Connection – Sure, shared playlists and favorite snacks

are cool, but when you connect spiritually, you're hitting a different kind of groove. It's like going from 3G to 5G. You understand each other's dreams, fears, and what truly makes each other tick. Your connection is stronger and more consistent.

2. No More Petty Fights – When you have shared values, things like deciding how to spend money, where to live, or who does the dishes is just easier. A spiritual foundation puts you on the same page when it comes to the life's decisions. Less arguing, more high-fives.

3. You Become Unstoppable During Tough Times – Life throws curveballs—like job stress, family drama, or “Why is the car making that weird noise again?” When you have a shared spiritual outlook, you tackle these problems like a team. You're not just surviving the hard stuff; you're growing stronger through it. Think of it as relationship armor.

4. Forgiveness Is Way Easier – Arguments turn into fights, but holding grudges is exhausting. Spirituality encourages forgiveness, which means you're more likely to move past disagreements without playing the blame game. It's like hitting the “refresh” button on your relationship.

5. You Grow Together – Relationships

aren't about staying in one place. With a spiritual foundation, you're both on a growth journey. Whether that's learning to be more patient, compassionate, or even discovering new ways to communicate, you're adapting side by side. Talk about a power couple!

How to add some spiritual magic to your relationship

1. Start a Tradition: It could be as simple as praying together, going for walks in nature, or having meaningful conversations about life's big questions.

2. Deep Conversations, Not Just Small Talk: Take time to talk about the stuff that matters—your dreams, values, and faith. What makes you feel connected to something bigger? These deep talks build emotional intimacy.

3. Be Each Other's Cheerleaders: Support each other's spiritual journeys. Whether that's giving them space for quiet reflection or joining them in a new faith practice, cheer each other on.

The bottom line

Sure, love and fun are great, but a spiritual foundation gives your relationship that extra wow factor. It's the secret sauce that takes you from “cute



Courtesy photo

Chaplain (Capt.) Jeff Rybold

couple” to “relationship goals.” With shared values, open hearts, and a little more belief in something bigger, you'll build a connection that's not just good—it's epic.

For more information about Luke AFB Chaplain Corps programs & events, “like” us on Facebook @ Luke AFB Chapel. Feeling like you need to talk? Give us a call: 623-856-6211 for confidential counseling.

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