

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mount Rushmore ceremony casts light on future leaders

Story by 1st Lt. Aaron Gatzke
196th Regiment (Regional Training Institute)

KEYSTONE, S.D. – One-hundred and nineteen officer candidates journeyed to Mount Rushmore National Memorial Friday, June 15 to observe the Evening Lighting ceremony and to celebrate successfully completing the first phase of their training to become second lieutenants.

This class of officer candidates has just completed two weeks of intense leadership training at Fort Meade as part of the 196th Regiment, Regional Training Institute's Officer Candidate School. Candidates from 17 states and Guam completed their End of Phase ceremony just hours before and have been granted a brief respite before moving on.

"These candidates have all affected each other in a positive way," said Command Sgt. Maj. Russel Young, OCS Battalion, 196th RTI. "Each one will take away valuable knowledge to their next phase."

Saturday, the candidates will part ways; some will travel home to complete phase two as traditional candidates, which means one weekend a month. The majority will continue full-time for another six weeks to complete the course this summer.

Candidates were able to attend the Evening Lighting ceremony, many for the first time. The ceremony was hosted by park staff, and included a history of the presidents featured on the Monument. The ceremony also brought an unexpected surprise for seven of the candidates – the opportunity to "Retire the Colors."

"It was totally unexpected," said Officer Candidate Alessandra Jacobsen, Utah Army National Guard of Salt Lake City. "They just came right up to us and asked if we wanted to help."

Jacobsen was assisted by six other candidates in taking down the flag; Justin Ollerich, Sioux Falls, Marc Sternin, Azusa, Calif, Jeffery Conley, Hurricane, W.V., Jennifer Henderson, Spokane, Wash., Preston Miller, Puyallup, Wash., and Leslie Kingery of Denver, member of the Wyoming ARNG.

Candidates will spend Saturday performing administrative functions and getting ready for the next phase. Candidates who have completed phase-one training elsewhere will join them, returning to regular training schedule on the June 17.

So far, the candidates have been tested by land navigation, academics, and a five-mile road march, all while assigned leadership duties during those challenges. Not all of the candidates that started have completed phase one, reflecting the demanding nature of the course.

According to Lt. Col. Orson Ward, 196th administrative officer, the induced stress has a purpose.

“What an officer candidate learns about caring for others in a stressful training environment is how the officer candidate will care for others in a combat zone – it directly correlates,” he said.

The candidates have been training around the clock since their arrival, making the down time at Mount Rushmore valuable. They have not been allowed to have any contact with their family, aside from mail. Candidates were allowed to retrieve their cell phones from the “contraband” locker Thursday night to begin charging batteries. Many candidates did their best to completely drain batteries calling loved ones they had not spoken to for two weeks.

The End of Phase ceremony also brought a change in leadership for the second phase. OCS Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Mark Harder, will transfer authority to the incoming commander, Lt. Col. Robert Bjornson, Alabama Army National Guard, for the next two weeks. Command Sgt. Maj. Russel Young will be replaced by Command Sgt. Maj. Patrick Couser at the OCS Battalion.

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JPEG 265- Officer Candidates from the OCS Battalion, 196th Regiment (Regional Training Institute) salute in the back ground as their peers carefully fold the American flag to “Retrieve the Colors” as a finish to Evening Lighting ceremony at Mount Rushmore National Memorial June 15, 2012 in South Dakota. The candidates will continue with Officer Candidate School at Fort Meade. (SDNG photo by 1st Lt. Aaron Gatzke)



JPEG 269- Officer Candidate Justin Ollerich, SDARNG of Sioux Falls, S.D., holds the flag to his chest as the master of ceremonies concludes the Evening Lighting ceremony June 15, 2012, at the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota. Ollerich and his 118 fellow candidates traveled back to the OCS Battalion, 196th Regiment (Regional Training Institute), at Fort Meade, to continue training for another six weeks after the ceremony. (SDNG photo by 1st Lt. Aaron Gatzke)

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