

# THE CARGO COURIER

123rd Airlift Wing, Kentucky Air National Guard, Louisville, Ky.

Vol. XXXIII, No. 12 • Dec. 1, 2018

## 5 Ky. Special Operators earn Bronze Stars

By Airman 1st Class Chloe Ochs  
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

Five members of the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron were awarded Bronze Star Medals during a ceremony here Nov. 17 for outstanding selflessness and bravery in the defense of the United States.

The Bronze Star Medal, bestowed for heroism or meritorious service in a combat zone, was awarded to Master Sgt. Blair A. Baerny, Master Sgt. Benjamin K. Pelster, Tech. Sgt. Joshua C. Busch, Staff Sgt. Daniel P. Keller and Staff Sgt. Robert W. Willgling.

Col. David J. Mounkes, commander of Kentucky's 123rd Airlift Wing, presented the awards before a crowd of more than 100 coworkers, friends and family members.

"I am extremely honored and humbled to be able to be a part of these ceremonies for what was accomplished," Mounkes told the audience. "Since 9/11, every Guard unit has struggled with becoming more operational, but with an STS unit in this wing, they lead the way. They are — by nature, by their mission — always operational."

Baerny distinguished himself for meritorious service as a pararescue team leader during Operation Freedom's Sentinel from Aug. 22 through Nov. 15, 2015. His outstanding performance, expertise and dedication to duty greatly contributed to the success of the unit's mission, according to the citation. Baerny's leadership ensured effective combat search and rescue coverage, mitigating risk and degrading the enemy's capabilities, the citation said.

Pelster, a combat control craftsman, distinguished himself by meritorious achievement as the non-commissioned officer in charge of an assault zone reconnaissance team from June 26 through Nov. 1, 2014. Pelster was instrumental in the execution of nine missions across five countries, which led to the establishment and expansion of critical air infrastructure in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, according to



**Clockwise from top left: Master Sgt. Blair A. Baerny, Master Sgt. Benjamin K. Pelster, Tech. Sgt. Joshua C. Busch, Staff Sgt. Daniel P. Keller and Staff Sgt. Robert W. Willgling of the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron received Bronze Star Medals here Nov. 17 for meritorious service while deployed overseas in support of combat operations.**

the citation. He supervised a 53-man team during a night infiltration and assessment of a strategic airfield in Southern Iraq. In addition to coordinating with Marine Corps force reconnaissance operators, Pelster also supervised a 12-man team that helped enable partner nation forces to maintain momentum and resupply forces in their fight against Al Qaeda, the citation said.

Busch, a combat control craftsman, served as key senior tactical advisor for 17 ground combat operations that helped prevent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria insurgents from overrunning dozens of critical checkpoints during Operation Freedom's Sentinel from Feb. 20 through May 14, 2018. He successfully led and coordinated 42 air and ground engagements while under direct enemy fire, according to the citation. On one occasion,

intense enemy fighting placed him inside the lethal radius of an improvised explosive device pressure plate. His decisive actions and composure under fire enabled him to immediately assess two patients and provide tactical combat care and medical evacuation to his explosive ordnance disposal teammate, despite a double amputation and extreme hemorrhaging, the citation said.

Keller, a combat control craftsman, distinguished himself in Eastern Afghanistan from April 23 through Oct. 1, 2017. Keller served at a combat outpost where he conducted operations and engaged the Islamic State of Iraq in 51 intense fire fights, according to the citation. Completely outnumbered on numerous occasions,

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# Latest Retiree Plaque unveiled at KyANG

By Master Sgt. Vicky Spesard  
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

Thirty-six former members of the 123rd Airlift Wing were honored here Sept. 16 when a plaque bearing their names was unveiled in front of the Lt. Gen. John B. Conaway Headquarters Building at the Kentucky Air National Guard Base.

The black granite tablet recognizes Airmen who completed 20 or more years of service and retired from the Kentucky Air National Guard in 2017.

A series of other plaques honors retirees dating all the way back to the unit's inception in 1947.

"A legacy is built on the foundation laid by those who have come before us," said Col. Jeffrey L. Wilkinson, commander of the 123rd Airlift Wing, during the unveiling ceremony.

"This legacy of excellence and service exists thanks to the commitment and values of the leaders who preceded us.

"I am honored to stand here on behalf of the men and women of the 123rd Airlift Wing to express our gratitude and appreciation to our retirees for their leadership, excellence and faithful service," he continued.

"We stand ready to bring all our capabilities

to bear in service to our nation, whether at home or abroad, and with true sincerity and respect, I thank all of our retirees for your service and contribution to the legacy of excellence that is

the Kentucky Air National Guard."

The annual plaque unveilings are made possible through donations from the non-profit Kentucky Air National Guard Retiree Group Inc.



Retired Senior Master Sgt. Tony Pickman (left) and retired Chief Master Sgt. Tim Atwell unveil a plaque bearing the names of 36 Airmen who retired from the 123rd Airlift Wing in 2017 during a ceremony here Sept. 16. The annual unveiling celebrates Airmen who served for 20 or more years. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Vicky Spesard)

## Medals

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Keller stopped several enemy assaults alongside his special forces brethren.

"His actions were imperative to his teams' safe and successful execution of hold and clearance operations and the fight against a determined enemy" threatening the people of Afghanistan, the citation said.

Willging, a combat control craftsman, displayed heroism while engaged with an opposing armed force on July 23, 2017. On this date, he served as a joint terminal attack

controller assigned to a special forces team, according to the citation. While on patrol against 350 fighters, Willging displayed disregard for his own personal safety by exposing himself to hostile fire in order to control close air support in defense of pinned-down assault elements. He safely deconflicted 15 aircraft while coordinating the medical evacuation of two personnel killed in action and five wounded in action. His personal courage and confidence contributed to his team's overall success and survival, the citation said.

Maj. Aaron J. Zamora, commander of the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron,

praised the recipients and distinguished the 123rd STS from other special tactics units.

"Throughout my career, I've been at six special operations units spread through (Air Force Special Operations Command, Air Combat Command) and the Guard," Zamora said.

"All were great, all had amazing work ethic, were full of heroes, warriors and amazing leaders. Since being here, I've noticed that there's something that sets us apart from all those other units. At the 123rd STS, there's a culture of excellence, and it seems that the work ethic is contagious throughout our organization."

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The editorial content is edited, prepared and provided by the Public Affairs Office of the 123rd Airlift Wing, Kentucky Air National Guard. All photographs are Air National Guard photographs unless otherwise indicated.

We welcome your feedback. Please contact the Public Affairs Office directly if you have suggestions for articles or photography. Our office is located in Room 1160 of the Wing Headquarters Building, 1101 Grade Lane, Louisville, KY 40213.

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