



Ohio Adjutant General's Department

Major General John C. Harris Jr., Adjutant General

Memorial Day We will never forget

There have been moments in the 38 years of my military career that will forever be etched in my memory. None of them are more memorable than the day in 2012 when I stood on an airport ramp while the flag-draped caskets of three of our fallen Ohio Army National Guard Soldiers were escorted off the airplane. Emotions ranged from anger to sympathy for the three heroes whose lives were cut short while serving their country.

The Ohio National Guard has experienced the loss of 15 men since the Global War on Terrorism began after 9/11. These patriots were fathers, husbands, sons and friends.

This year will mark the 15th anniversary of four of the deaths.

Sgt. Michael Barkey was just 22 years old when the vehicle he was riding in blew a tire and turned over on a road in Ramadi, Iraq, on July 7, 2004. The young man from Canal Fulton, Ohio, was assigned to the 1484th Transportation Company in Akron.

That same day, also in Iraq, **Spc. Samuel "Smokey" Bowen** of Cleveland, assigned to the 216th Engineer Battalion in Hamilton, died when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded near his vehicle. Bowen, 38, was credited with pulling a wounded fellow Soldier from the line of fire in June, even as he also was wounded.

Pfc. Ryan Martin and **1st Lt. Charles Wilkins III** died on Aug. 20 when an improvised explosive device exploded near their vehicle outside of Samarra, Iraq. Martin was a 22-year-old Soldier from Mount Vernon, Ohio, who family and friends said loved sports and fixing cars. Wilkins, a 38-year-old from Columbus, was a transportation planner and law school student. Both men were members of Company A, 216th Engineer Battalion in Chillicothe.

This Memorial Day, we remember these brave warriors and the nearly 7,000 U.S. service men and women killed in the past 18 years. Their loss is still felt today by those they left behind: their family, friends, employers and communities.

The National Guard heritage extends beyond the battlefield. We have the honor and privilege to serve our citizens in the homeland — in our communities. During times of natural and man-made disasters, Ohio National Guard Soldiers and Airmen have saved lives, protected people and property, and helped restore cities and towns. This weekend, Guard members will pay their respect by marching in local parades, decorating military graves, and speaking at events commemorating Memorial Day.

The three-day weekend ahead gives us extra time to spend with family and friends, but it is also an opportunity to pay tribute to the legacy of all of our fallen military heroes. We must never forget that because of their sacrifices, our democracy thrives and freedom endures.

Major General John C. Harris, Jr.
Ohio National Guard, The Adjutant General