



Family, friends and state officials send off 123 members of the Connecticut National Guard who are deploying to Cuba



Valery DiFronzo, 6, hugs her father Staff Sgt. Richard DiFronzo after a send-off ceremony Tuesday for the Connecticut National Guard 643rd Military Police Company at the Governor William A. O'Neill State Armory in Hartford. The 123-member company is deploying to a yearlong mission at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. (Michael McAndrews/Special to the Courant) (Michael McAndrews / Hartford Courant)

Capt. Robin Felder has been training constantly in preparation for a major deployment to Cuba to help her fellow soldiers on the island.

As the commander of the military police company in the Connecticut Army National Guard, Felder will be leading 123 soldiers to oversee the care and custody of the enemy detainees who are currently being held at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. Despite pledges to close the detention camp, Guantanamo Bay has remained opened since 2002 and still had at least 40 detainees as of last year, officials said.

For the Connecticut troops, it is the trip of a lifetime. They gathered with their families Tuesday for a send-off ceremony at the state armory in Hartford, as they prepare to head to an Army post in Texas for more training before flying to the Caribbean.

Despite the rigors of being away from their families and friends for a full year, Felder and her troops say they are ready for their extended mission.



"It actually is our Super Bowl," Felder said. "We've been training for a year for this, and we're going to the Super Bowl — and we're going to execute very well. I'm proud of my guys, and I'm fully confident in their ability to do the mission."



Members of the Connecticut National Guard's 643rd Military Police Company attend a send-off ceremony at the state armory in Hartford on Tuesday. (Michael McAndrews / Special to the Courant) (Michael McAndrews / Hartford Courant)

Although they will be working on a serious assignment, Felder said the troops are looking forward to their mission.

"It is exciting," she said. "For most of the soldiers here, this will be their first deployment — so they're very excited to support the nation. We're really excited and ready to go. I'm fully confident that my unit will be able to execute the mission."

The sprawling Guantanamo Bay military base, which at 45 square miles is more than twice the size of the city of Hartford, is filled with members of the Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard.

During the send-off ceremony Tuesday, state [Treasurer Shawn Wooden](#) told the troops: "We will never forget that it is your courage, your sweat and sometimes your blood that keeps America free. ... I'll be here when you return."



Maj. Gen. Fran Evon, left, and Capt. Robin Felder, right, present Gov. Ned Lamont with a spent canon shell casing used during Lamont's inauguration in January after a send-off ceremony for the 643rd Military Police Company at the Governor William A. O'Neill State Armory in Hartford on Tuesday. (Michael McAndrews / Special to the Courant) (Michael McAndrews / Hartford Courant)

Gov. Ned Lamont did not speak from the stage because he was tied up in a traffic jam, but he mingled freely with the troops when he arrived after the official ceremony had ended.

"Do you get back at all over the course of the year?" Lamont asked a soldier.

"Not quite, sir," said the soldier, who declined to give his full name.

"You're a good man on the front lines," Lamont responded. "Come back safe."

Lamont was surprised and burst into a big smile when Felder and Maj. Gen. Fran Evon presented him with one of the shells from the 19-gun salute in his honor on his inauguration day in January. The item was engraved with Lamont's name.

"I'm going to put that right in my office," Lamont said.

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