

THE WARRIOR

Newsletter

From Recruit to Leader: CDT McCollum's Journey to Commissioning By Rachell McCollum - Senior Class of 2025

My journey to becoming a Military Intelligence Officer in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard began during my junior year of high school. I attended a college fair with the simple goal of exploring my options for higher education—but a brief conversation changed everything. While walking through the fair, I stopped at the Pennsylvania Army National Guard booth. The recruiter spoke to me only briefly, but what he said stuck with me for days. I was just 17, but the idea of serving my country, pushing myself to grow, and easing the financial burden on my parents deeply resonated with me. After talking it over with my family and getting their support, I made the decision to enlist.

Split-Option and Basic Training Through the Guard's "Split-Option" program, I was able to attend Basic Combat Training (BCT) during the summer before my senior year of high school. In May 2021, I shipped off to BCT—a formative experience where I quickly realized that I had made the right choice.

I competed to become my company's honor graduate, excelling through physical tests and a board interview. I also developed lasting friendships, many with cadets from ROTC programs across the country. Conversations with officers and those cadets sparked something new: an interest in becoming an officer through ROTC.

Minuteman Scholarship and Joining Warrior Battalion When I returned from BCT, I shared my goal with my recruiter, who helped me apply for the Minuteman Scholarship—a competitive program offering full tuition for National Guard cadets. A week before graduating high school, I received word that I had been selected. I would attend Indiana University of Pennsylvania and join the Warrior Battalion as a cadet.

A Four-Year Mission, Fulfilled Now, four years later, I am preparing to commission as a Military Intelligence Officer in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. When I first enlisted, intelligence was my top choice for an MOS, but it wasn't available for Split-Option Soldiers. That dream never faded, and ROTC gave me the path to pursue it. Looking back, I can confidently say that joining the Guard and pursuing ROTC has been one of the most rewarding decisions of my life. I've gained leadership skills, a debt-free education, and a future of continued service in a branch I'm passionate about. As I prepare to take the oath as a commissioned officer, I'm proud of how far I've come—and excited for the next chapter.



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- The Burden!



Preparing for Cadet Summer Training (CST) - *What to Expect and How to Succeed!* By Elizabeth Caldwell - Senior Class of 2025

Every summer, ROTC cadets across the country take on one of the most demanding—and rewarding—parts of their journey: Cadet Summer Training (CST). Held at Fort Knox, Kentucky, CST is a mandatory 35-day leadership evaluation for third-year cadets that shapes not only tactical proficiency but also national rankings for future commissioning.

So what is CST? CST is divided into Garrison and Field phases. During the Garrison phase, cadets are tested on individual skills including the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT), land navigation (day and night), marksmanship, rappelling, ruck marches, and the obstacle course.

The Field phase includes a series of tactical lanes where cadets rotate leadership positions and are evaluated on their ability to lead under pressure in simulated combat scenarios. Throughout the training, cadets are mentored and assessed by seasoned cadre.

Performance at CST plays a crucial role in determining branch placement and overall order of merit going into senior year. Beyond the rigorous training, CST is also a time to build friendships, develop confidence, and grow as a leader. For those heading to Fort Knox this summer—prepare physically, study the basics, and go in with the mindset to lead and learn.



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The Theta Chi Scholarship



CDT Elizabeth Caldwell receives the 2024 Theta Chi Heroes Memorial Scholarship at

Pierce hall. The Scholarship is provided yearly to an outstanding Army ROTC cadet currently attending IUP. The “Theta Chi Heroes Memorial Scholarship” is given in the name of two of Epsilon Eta’s fallen brothers: 1st Lt. James Flannery (1968) and FBI Agent Gregory W. Spinelli (1970). Brother Flannery was killed in action in Vietnam and Brother Spinelli is the youngest FBI Agent ever killed in the line of duty.

Earning My Wings: Air Assault at Fort Moore

By Michael Ames - Senior Class of 2025

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to attend Air Assault School at Fort Moore, Georgia through the Warrior Training Center. Over ten of the most intense days of my Army career so far, I learned how to sling load equipment beneath helicopters, rappel from UH-60 Black Hawks, and navigate high-pressure environments with precision and grit.



Air Assault is known for its high attrition rate, and each day tested our physical endurance and mental adaptability. From rigorous inspections to fast-paced testing, the environment pushed me and my classmates to support one another and develop as a cohesive, high-performing team.

One of the best moments came during a 4-mile formation run, where camaraderie and confidence took over. Our class—now solidified after several had dropped—ran together in unison, led by Blackhat instructors and motivated NCOs. It was more than just a run; it was a symbol of how far we’d come.

I went into Air Assault unsure if I’d pass, but I found I could thrive under pressure, learn quickly from mistakes, and push past my limits. I met leaders from across the military—including the Air Force, Infantry units, and 3rd Special Forces Group—and their perspectives enriched the entire experience.

I’m grateful I got a second shot after missing the opportunity as a sophomore. For anyone considering Air Assault or any challenge that tests your limits—I say go for it. The growth and sense of achievement are absolutely worth it.

Leadership in the Tactical Environment

By Garret Coffman - Senior Class of 2025

Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) is home to a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, one of four official pathways to becoming a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army. Through ROTC, students engage in morning physical training (PT), military science classes, and weekly field labs designed to build leadership and tactical skills.

A central part of the program is the Thursday leadership lab, a three-hour session where cadets—especially juniors—are evaluated on their leadership performance in simulated combat scenarios. These labs prepare cadets for Cadet Summer Training (CST), with evaluations based on a grading scale of E (Exceeds), P (Proficient), C (Capable), and U (Unsatisfactory), using "blue cards."

What sets IUP's ROTC apart is its student-led structure. Senior cadets take on the role of evaluators, offering

detailed feedback to help juniors grow. One senior cadet shared that their own experiences as a junior—especially receiving vague or unhelpful evaluations—drive them to provide fair, constructive feedback now that they are on the other side.

"Going from being evaluated to evaluating others has deepened my tactical understanding," the cadet said. "It's not just about grading—it's about helping others improve and preparing them for the real challenges ahead."

By rotating cadets through leadership roles and holding them to high standards, IUP's ROTC ensures each cadet is prepared, both mentally and tactically, for success at CST and beyond.



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Pre-Marksmanship Instruction (PMI)



Cadet Robertson aims down the sights of an M4 in preparation to pull the trigger!

"It's incredibly cool"...

...that IUP Army ROTC has its own rifle range right in its building, offering cadets convenient, on-site access to firearms training. This unique feature enhances hands-on marksmanship skills without needing to travel off-campus. It also sets IUP apart by integrating real-world training directly into the daily ROTC experience.

The Army's Cadet Troop Leader's Training

By Jill Abell and Matthew Bowser - Senior Class of 2025

This past summer, immediately following Cadet Summer Training (CST), Cadets Bowser and Abell from Indiana University of Pennsylvania's ROTC program traveled to Germany for 28 days as part of the Army's Cadet Troop Leader Training (CTLT) program. CTLT allows cadets to shadow active-duty officers, experience daily life in operational Army units, and explore potential branches before making final selections. Though both were stationed in Germany, Bowser and Abell were assigned to different units across the country, offering each a unique perspective on Army life overseas.

Cadet Abell was attached to the 39th Transportation Battalion within the 21st Theater Sustainment Command, located in Kaiserslautern. There, Abell rotated through three companies: an Inland Cargo Transportation Company (ICTC), a Movement Control Team (MCT), and the 66th Transportation Detachment. The experience provided valuable insight into logistics operations and the U.S. military's ongoing support of European efforts related to the war in Ukraine. Abell participated in convoy planning, vehicle maintenance, and officer-level meetings, while also exploring historic cities like Heidelberg, Rudesheim, and Athens during weekends.

Cadet Bowser spent his time with the 5th Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery Regiment in Ansbach. Assigned to Alpha Battery, he worked closely with the Maneuver Short Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD) system, the Army's latest short-range air defense platform. His CTLT included daily operations alongside a platoon leader and a three-day field training exercise (FTX), where he engaged in tactical training and team-building events. Bowser also explored Munich and Nuremberg, deepening his understanding of Germany's culture and history.

Both cadets returned with invaluable leadership insights and hands-on experience in their prospective branches. They highly recommend CTLT to future cadets looking to broaden their military knowledge and experience Army life abroad.

Hands-On Experience Through Nurse Summer Training Program

By Anastasia Radlinsky - Senior Class of 2025

This past summer, an Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Army ROTC cadet had the unique opportunity to participate in the Nurse Summer Training Program (NSTP) at Madigan Army Medical Center, located at Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) in Washington state. NSTP is a 28-day clinical immersion experience that allows ROTC nursing cadets to shadow Army nurses and gain firsthand insight into what their future roles as Army nurses might entail.

During the program, the cadet completed 12-hour shifts on various hospital units, including a Medical-Surgical (Med Surg) floor and the Emergency Department (ED)—accumulating over 150 clinical hours. NSTP also offers exposure to a wide range of nursing specialties such as pediatrics, psychiatry, ICU, the operating room (OR), and emergency medicine, allowing participants to explore areas they may wish to pursue after commissioning.

The Emergency Department proved to be especially impactful. “It gave me a great opportunity to see if emergency nursing is something I truly want to pursue,” the cadet shared. “I experienced the fast-paced nature of trauma care and witnessed how critical communication and teamwork

are in those high-stress situations.”

Under the guidance of a nursing preceptor, the cadet administered medications, performed blood draws, learned to place IVs, and practiced a wide range of essential clinical skills. The mentorship and openness of the nursing staff created an ideal learning environment for skill-building and confidence.

NSTP wasn’t all work—the program also provided opportunities to explore the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest. On days off, cadets hiked Mount Rainier, explored Leavenworth, trekked through the Enchantments, and visited Seattle.

Another valuable aspect of NSTP was the chance to connect with newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenants, who shared insights about their experiences with Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), the transition from college to active duty, and their first assignments.

“I’m incredibly grateful for the opportunity to travel across the country and gain hands-on experience doing something I love,” the cadet said.



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Building Esprit De Corps

Warrior Battalion 2024 Halloween PT fosters camaraderie within the formation by encouraging



cadets to participate in themed workouts while wearing costumes, creating a fun and relaxed environment. The event breaks the routine of standard physical training, allowing cadets to bond over shared laughter and creative costume choices. It strengthens team spirit by promoting inclusivity and boosting morale across class years and ranks.

ROTC at a Branch School: Leadership Beyond the Classroom

By Hunter Blasko - Senior Class of 2025

ROTC is the largest commissioning source for the U.S. Army, alongside West Point, OCS, and direct commissioning. At Saint Francis University, where I study environmental engineering, we don’t have our own ROTC unit. Instead, we’re part of the Warrior Battalion, hosted by Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP).

The Warrior Battalion brings together cadets from several smaller schools—including Saint Francis, Mount Aloysius College, and Pitt Johnstown. While our daily routines happen on our individual campuses, we travel to IUP for weekly leadership labs and joint training exercises.

Being a cadet at a branch campus has its challenges and rewards. The commute to IUP can be tiring, especially with a demanding academic load. Communication between campuses can be tricky. Still, our smaller cadet community allows for more personalized mentorship and training.

One standout experience is our “Tactical Tutoring” sessions. Led by senior cadets, these small-group discussions prepare juniors for Cadet Summer Training—a 35-day evaluation between junior and senior year. While larger schools might have 10–15 cadets per session, we often train in groups of just 3–4, allowing for deeper discussion and feedback.

Morning PT, held Tuesday through Thursday, also benefits from our small numbers. Workouts are easily tailored to individual goals, often leading to stronger fitness results. As branch school commander my senior year, I’ve overseen daily operations, helped plan battalion-wide training, and supported cadets across all branch campuses. This leadership role has deepened my appreciation for ROTC and the unique opportunities of a smaller program.



-IUP Ranger Challenge Team of 2024 brings it in as a team during the Burden Event with CDT Caldwell smiling and CDT Kessler flexing for the camera!
Left Photo



-CDT Kessler completes the Tire Flip during the Burden!
Right Photo

Ranger Challenge: The Ultimate Test of Grit and Camaraderie By Matthew Kessler - Senior Class of 2025

Throughout my four years in Army ROTC at IUP, one experience stands above the rest—Ranger Challenge. Competing on the Warrior Battalion's team has not only made college more fulfilling but also transformed me into a better leader and teammate. What is Ranger Challenge?

Ranger Challenge is an annual ROTC competition that brings together colleges from across the Northeastern United States. It's the culminating event that teams train for throughout the semester—sometimes all year. The winning team earns a coveted spot at the Sandhurst Competition at West Point, NY, competing against national and international teams. Ranger Challenge tests cadets physically, mentally, and tactically through a series of grueling events. After a selective tryout process, 11 cadets are chosen to represent the team and begin intensive training together.



The competition kicks off with *The Burden*—an event that sets the tone. Teams run three miles while carrying four full water cans. Then, they transport heavy Army gear across a 60-meter stretch multiple times. It's a physical and mental wake-up call.

The second day is the most demanding, beginning with a six-mile ruck march carrying 35-pound packs. Immediately after, the round-robin events begin with the Army Obstacle Course: Navigate walls, ropes, and balance beams with speed and teamwork. One-Rope Bridge: Build and cross a rope bridge carrying full gear—fast, safe, and synchronized. Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC): Simulate battlefield medical evacuation while following correct procedures. Hand Grenade Assault Course: Sprint, throw training grenades accurately, navigate obstacles, and evacuate a casualty. Weapons Proficiency: Complete physical challenges before conducting written exams and assembling/disassembling weapon systems. Functional Fitness: Max out on sprint-drag-carries, deadlifts, push-ups, and carries while working as a team. The Crucible: The final round-robin challenge. A combination of memory, logistics movement, weapons, and physical exertion—this event tests every dimension of performance.

After the round-robin events, there's a rare break—a time to bond. Cadets cook together, play games, and enjoy time outdoors. These moments are where the team truly connects and builds unbreakable trust and brotherhood. The final event is a five-mile team run—brutal after two days of nonstop competition. Exhausted, yet driven, the team must push through pain and fatigue to finish strong. Once the run concludes, the awards ceremony brings closure, recognizing the grit and dedication of every team.

Participating in Ranger Challenge has been one of the most rewarding and defining experiences of my college and ROTC journey. It sharpened my leadership, tested my resilience, and created friendships that will last a lifetime. If you want to push your limits, lead from the front, and build a team like no other, then Ranger Challenge and ROTC at IUP are exactly where you need to be.

The Dual Path: Balancing ROTC and Pre-Med Success

By Nathan Poplos - Senior Class of 2025

As I near the end of my undergraduate studies, I'm proud to reflect on the path that brought me here—balancing the demands of ROTC and a pre-med track. It hasn't been easy, but the experience has shaped me into a stronger, more disciplined leader and positioned me well for the future. I'm excited to share that I've been accepted to medical school and have officially submitted my application for the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP).

Early Challenges and Hard Lessons When I began college as a biology major with a pre-med concentration, I also made the decision to join ROTC. I knew combining these two rigorous paths would be a challenge, but I was determined. My days often started with 5:30 AM physical training and ended with midnight study sessions. Courses like anatomy and physiology demanded everything I had, and balancing both commitments tested my time management like never before.

MCAT and Medical School Applications—Midway through my program, MCAT prep became a central focus. I dedicated full Saturdays to practice exams, pushing through mental exhaustion in pursuit of a competitive score. At the same time, I was applying to about a dozen medical schools, knowing the process would be long and uncertain. Interview invites came in slowly, and acceptances even more so—but I remained hopeful and focused.

Military Training and Career Planning - While applying to medical schools, I was also preparing for Cadet Summer Training and pursuing the HPSP, which covers medical school tuition in exchange for military service. Balancing these two major transitions—military training and launching my medical career—was intense, but it reaffirmed my commitment to both service and medicine.

Where I Am Now - Now in my final semester, I can say confidently that the hard work paid off. I've been accepted to medical school, and I've submitted my HPSP application. It's a huge relief and an exciting next step.

Advice for Others

To anyone considering ROTC while preparing for a professional program like medicine: it's absolutely possible, and it's worth it. ROTC not only eased my financial burden for undergrad, but it also gave me leadership experience that strengthened my med school applications. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done—but also one of the most rewarding.

If you're thinking about a similar path, I hope my story shows that with discipline and determination, you can make it happen.

IUP Army ROTC

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