

South Dakota National Guard

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Officer candidates celebrate graduation at Mt. Rushmore

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KEYSTONE, S.D. – One hundred sixty-one U.S. Army National Guard officer candidates from 19 states, one U.S. territory, and the U.S. Army Reserve attended their graduation ceremony from Officer Candidate School at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, July 29.

The ceremony represents the end of Officer Candidate School, the first step in officer training and development, and the beginning of their careers as commissioned officers.

“I would tell you being a leader is a journey, not a destination,” said Brig. Gen. Steven Kremer, Iowa National Guard assistant adjutant general and the ceremony’s guest speaker. Leading effectively is based on your experiences, both the positive as well as the negative.”

The OCS program in South Dakota is one of two programs throughout the U.S. that offers all three phases of OCS in one location, allowing National Guard Soldiers to pursue the accelerated eight-week option or a traditional option, which consists of 16 to 18 months of drill weekends and two two-week training periods.

“No matter which path the officer candidate chooses, traditional or accelerated, they all have the same requirements, the same training and the same classes that need to be completed,” said Lt. Col. Matthew Symonds, commander for this summer’s accelerated OCS program in South Dakota. “Our expectation once they leave here is that they are ready to be platoon leaders of our young men and women.”

OCS is taught in a high-stress environment, where candidates are tested academically and physically, both in the classroom and in field environments.

“The officer candidates have to complete a 6 mile road march, a 9 mile road march, and a 12 mile road march which are all timed; as well as a 4 mile release run, land navigation tests, and some academic tests,” said Symonds. “Everybody is still growing and learning when they leave here. We cannot give them all the tools; we just give them a good basis for what they need to do. We have helped them learn their strengths and weaknesses, so they know when they go out what to work on.”

In order for the candidates to be successful throughout the program, they had to rely on each other’s strengths and maintain a high degree of cooperation between one another.

“You can be self-confident in a lot of things but if you are not willing to work as a team, it is really not going to matter,” said Officer Candidate Heather Theis, SDARNG. “You need to be willing to be there for your Soldiers and counterparts; be willing to do whatever you can to help somebody out, no matter how big or small it is.”

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The candidates' next step to developing as an officer is to attend the Basic Officer Leader Course, which focuses on their branch-specific training; such as engineering, field artillery and transportation.

“As a leader, you are here to serve and provide leadership to those Soldiers who work for and with you,” said Kremer. “Mentor them, develop them, and train them. Do not just go through the motions. Strive for excellence, this will prepare them as well as yourself for life’s opportunities and life’s adversities.”

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220729-Z-FO830-1472: U.S. Army graduating officer candidates stand before Mount Rushmore, the last time they are assembled together following their graduation at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, S.D., July 29, 2022. One hundred sixty-one candidates successfully completed phase three Officer Candidate School conducted by the South Dakota Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 196th Regiment (Regional Training Institute). The ceremony signifies their readiness to become officers in the U.S. Army. (U.S. Army National Guard photo composite illustration by Sgt. Tyler O'Connell)



220729-Z-FO830-1008: U.S. Army officer candidates and graduation attendees stand for the national anthem at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, S.D., July 29, 2022. The ceremony represents the end of Officer Candidate School, the first step in officer training and development, and the beginning of their careers as commissioned officers. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Tyler O'Connell)



220729-Z-JQ500-1054: U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Steven Kremer, Iowa National Guard assistant adjutant general, delivers keynote speech at the graduation ceremony for Officer Candidate School at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, S.D., July 29, 2022. Kremer was the guest speaker for the ceremony, which signifies the completion of a crucial milestone for the candidates to becoming an officer in the U.S. Army. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Oscar Valdez)



220729-Z-JQ500-1079: Officer Candidates listens to keynote speech by the guest speaker at their graduation ceremony for Officer Candidate School at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, S.D., July 29, 2022. Officer candidates completed the traditional and accelerated program of Officer Candidate School by the South Dakota Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 196th Regiment (Regional Training Institute). (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Oscar Valdez)



220729-Z-FO830-1439: South Dakota Army National Guard Officer Candidates sit in front of Mount Rushmore after their graduation ceremony at Mount Rushmore near Keystone, S.D., July 29, 2022. SDARNG OCS graduates from left to right: Amy Brandt, Sheldon Brakke, Angelo Barbaruolo, Zachary Campbell, Zachary Lothspeich, Heather Theis, Richard Langdeaux. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Tyler O'Connell)

