

'We are Army heritage': The 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team reflects on its history, diversity and the legacy they leave behind

By 1st Lt. Catherine M. Bean, 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team July 1, 2022



'We are Army heritage': The 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team reflects on its history

In 2019, the Secretary of the Army signed Army Directive 2019-20, which established June as Army Heritage Month. Focused around the Army's Birthday on Jun. 14, Army Heritage Month is a time for all units to reflect and ho

nor the "service and sacrifices of a diverse army and our long history of defending the Nation and our national interests." As the 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team is over 160 years old, the brigade is exceptionally proud of the unit's past, present and future.

According to the U.S. Army Center of Military History, the 116th IBCT can trace its lineage back to Mar. 17, 1858, when the first Virginians assembled as the West Augusta Guard in the Virginia Militia. In 1861, the volunteer unit was assigned to the Virginia Volunteers and fought in the American Civil War.

Finally, after 57 years, on Jun. 3, 1916, the Virginia Volunteers were redesignated as the Virginia National Guard. Sixteen months later, the 116th Infantry was organized as an element under the 29th Infantry Division. Units of the 116th Infantry continued to participate in every major American war from World War I to the Global War on Terrorism and are still supporting missions all over the world.

Col. Christopher Samulski, 116th IBCT commander, takes great pride in being the commander of a unit with such a detailed history.

“I think history is the foundation of the beginning of the Army in the sense that there was a group of people that fought in something they believed in, something they valued more than their own lives,” he said. “They were willing to sacrifice all of that, for an ideal that was bigger than themselves and if you look at the people that serve in our formation today, that still rings true.”

The 116th IBCT is comprised of an extremely diverse formation of Soldiers from all walks of life. From first-generation to fifth-generation Soldiers, each Soldier wears the blue and grey patch on their left shoulder that tells a story of their predecessors that have come before them and those that have paid the ultimate sacrifice.

According to a history article published by the Virginia National Guard, the 29th ID unit patch, worn by all 116th IBCT Soldiers, was initially created during World War I by Maj. James Ulio, who went on to become a major general and the Adjutant General of the Army. At the time, Ulio recognized the diversity and uniqueness of a division made up of Soldiers from both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. In acknowledgment of this, he designed a unit insignia that would highlight the unification and integration of Soldiers who had previously fought against each other. Ulio combined the monad, the Korean symbol of eternal life, with the colors blue and grey, to symbolize the Soldiers of the 29th ID. In 1918, the Adjutant General of the Army officially approved the design and the 29th ID patch became the Army’s first registered division patch.

“I think the patch that we wear on our shoulders says a lot about our ability to come together as an organization,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Irving Reed, Jr., 116th IBCT command sergeant major. “That was a very turbulent time in our history and we were able to put all that aside and come together as a unit. And that’s a part of who we are... we may not all believe in the same things, but we’re one unit and that’s a big part of our diversity and what makes us who we are.”

The 116th IBCT, headquartered in Staunton, where the original Augusta County Regiment first mustered, is made up of over 3,000 Soldiers from across all corners of Virginia, with the units located as far west as Pulaski, Leesburg to the north, Virginia Beach to the east and Danville as the furthest southern unit. In addition to all units in Virginia, 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry, based out of Barbourville, Kentucky, is

aligned with the 116th for training and readiness oversight. The range of units is spread far and wide, allowing diversity to flourish throughout the ranks.

Maj. Eddie Bailey, brigade logistics officer, has spent all 16 years of his military service in the Virginia National Guard and has been with the 116th IBCT since 2013. When he joined the 116th as the brigade assistant operations officer, he was eager to have the opportunity to work with every unit across the state. Throughout his career, he has always felt strongly about the importance of diversity within the Army and its criticality for mission success.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all Soldier,” he said. “Soldiers come in different sizes, colors, shapes, religions, ethnicities and I think that’s what makes the Army what it is.”

Bailey continued, “And it’s important for the Army to embrace this diversity because everybody brings something different to the Army and each individual unit. When the Army leverages every Soldier’s talents, strengths and passions the organization becomes stronger, as a whole.”

In the eyes of the brigade command team, Samulski and Reed see diversity among the ranks, especially among senior officers and senior noncommissioned officers, as an opportunity for younger Soldiers to see themselves in positions of greater responsibility and leadership.

“(Diversity) provides everyone an opportunity to understand that if you work hard and you follow the Army Values, you can be at the highest levels in the Army leadership,” said Samulski.

Reed shared that it's important each Soldier feels like they are an active member of an inclusive team, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, and that every Soldier trusts their actions are weighed on their merit and willingness to work hard.

Sgt. 1st Class Shannon Riddle, brigade battle desk NCO in charge, has been in the military for 23 years. After 8 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, she joined the Virginia National Guard and became a member of the 116th IBCT family in 2012. She describes her transition into the unit as an extremely inclusive experience.

“When I became a member of the 116th that was the first time in (my military career) that I had felt like I was a part of something bigger,” she said. “There were people who cared about me, where I went in my career and what I needed to do to succeed as a Soldier and a member of their team.”

Riddle added she takes pride in ensuring that all Soldiers who come to the 116th feel the same sense of inclusion she first felt 10 years ago.

More than 164 years after the first riflemen of Virginia mustered in Augusta County, the Virginia National Guard is still deploying units in support of missions across the world. At the beginning of 2022, the Virginia National Guard had more than 2,000 personnel serving on federal active duty, the most since 2007. The 29th ID and, subsequently, the 116th IBCT had the most divisional Soldiers on federal duty since WWII.

The 29th ID headquarters element recently returned from their deployment in support of Operation Spartan Shield based in Kuwait. The 116th IBCT headquarters element and 2nd Battalion, 224th Aviation Regiment, 29th ID are currently deployed in support of the NATO Kosovo Forces, or KFOR, mission in Kosovo. In addition, 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry is deployed to the Horn of Africa and 1st Battalion, 111th Field Artillery is deployed to U.S. Central Command.

The continued service and commitment of all Virginia National Guard Soldiers is a source of great pride to the state of Virginia and the U.S. Army. While the celebration of Army Heritage Month is new, the Virginia National Guard and the 116th IBCT have held their unit's legacy in such high regard for centuries.

"I think it's important that we remember the history of the (116th IBCT) because the history of this unit is what has made it what it is today," Bailey said. "The legacy and the professionalism, from when the 116th served in the Civil War, or when they stormed the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, or when we served in Iraq and Afghanistan, the current other ongoing deployments and now here in Kosovo, all of that has led up to the deployment we are on now. I think every little piece of (history) along the way has helped mold the unit into a more professional fighting organization and if you don't understand exactly where (the unit) has been, then you'll never be able to shape where it's going."

Upon redeployment, the brigade headquarters command team will uncase their colors in Staunton, Virginia and start its next chapter in the history book. The unit will dedicate the unraveling of colors to honor the sacrifices of the 116th Soldiers that have served before and mark the beginning of a new training cycle to ensure the unit is always prepared to answer the Nation's call.

"When you look at all the battle streamers on the brigade colors, you see the lineage of the unit and the history behind each streamer. Now, we are the Soldiers that make up this unit and this is our story - our legacy to continue," Riddle said.

“We are Army heritage,” Samulski said. “Every day we write a new chapter. Whether it’s a Soldier gaining their citizenship, a Soldier deployed for the first time or the fourth time, or Soldiers serving with their children, every day we continue to add to the U.S. Army family and to the great heritage that this organization has won through blood, sweat and tears.”

Samulski added, “It’s an inspiring organization to be involved with because there have been a lot of people that have come before us and some that given all, so if we can serve and do what we are supposed to do, we can make sure that what has been sacrificed before us is not forgotten or done in vain. We will continue to add to this heritage and I’m proud to have the opportunity to continue the legacy of the Army and the 116th IBCT.”

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