

A Day of Honor – Connecting the Past to the Present through Tradition, Memories and Experiences

Ssg Erin Conway–18th Field Artillery Brigade



Top Left: MG (R) Wilson A. Shoffner, a former commander of the 18th Field Artillery Brigade, speaks to Soldiers during an honorary change of command ceremony Jan. 12, 2023, on Fort Liberty. Top Right: MG (R) Shoffner passes the guidon to CSM (R) Steven Payton, a former CSM of the Steel Brigade, during an installation ceremony recognizing both as honorary Colonel and Command Sergeant Major of the brigade. The day of honor, lineage and tradition concluded with the Saint Barbara's Day Ball. Middle: CSM Payton attended the brigade ball as the honorary guest speaker. Bottom: CSM Payton speaks to Soldiers during an installation ceremony.

FORT LIBERTY, N.C. – The 18th Field Artillery Brigade started 2023 off with the Saint Barbara's Day Ball – a tradition that hadn't been held since 2018 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. This annual custom honoring the artillery's patron saint came with a twist this year. Instead of just hosting a ball in the evening and recognizing current Soldiers, the 18th Field Artillery Brigade turned it into a day filled with legacy and tradition from start to finish, including recognizing the brigade's first honorary Colonel and Command Sergeant Major – a ceremony normally only held at the regimental and corps levels.

COL Jonathan Harvey, 18th Field Artillery Brigade commander at the time, knew he wanted to hold the Saint Barbara's Day Ball in 2021, but the pandemic postponed it yet another year. During that extended planning period, Harvey decided to not only honor individuals currently in the brigade with the coveted Orders of Saint Barbara and Molly Pitcher awards as per usual at the evening ball but to turn the whole day into a day where Soldiers both past and present are recognized together.

"Tying today to our history is what allows us to see where we have come from so that we can do honor to those whose shoulders we stand on," Harvey said.

After discussion with many former Steel leaders and reviewing requirements and regulation, MG (Ret.) Wilson Al Shoffner and Command Sergeant Major (Ret.) Steven Payton were chosen as the first honorary Colonel and Command Sergeant Major, respectively, of the 18th Field Artillery Brigade. Along with a formal ceremony, the two honorees returned to the Steel Brigade for PT in the morning, professional development sessions during the day and finally to the ball that evening.

"We decided if they are here, why not only hear them talk about their experiences but show them today's Soldier experience with things like H2F?" Harvey said, explaining his thought process behind the unique day. "It seemed to make sense to have

a whole day celebrating who we were and who we are and connect the two.”

For Shoffner, who had only been back to the brigade he commanded once since leaving and Payton, who hadn’t been back at all, the day was surreal.

“It was great to be back around Soldiers and an honor to be recognized by the brigade,” Shoffner said.

He and Payton served as Steel 6 from 2009 to 2011 and Steel 9 from 2011 to 2013, respectively.

“Without a doubt, it was a great honor, as was my experience with the 18th Fires Brigade during my time,” Payton said. “The history of organizations is what the future of that organization is going to be built on. To know and understand what the organization has been through and been a part of and the progress it has made makes a difference to the existing and future organization.”

The two were able to see how much has changed since their time leading the organization, but almost more importantly, what has stayed the same.

“The commitment to excellence that the brigade has not changed,” Shoffner said.

Shoffner said the commitment to excellence can be seen in the effectiveness of HIMARS (high mobility artillery rocket system) right now, in Eastern Europe and specifically Ukraine. They have become the game changers they are because of the past and current leaders in the brigade having cultivated their knowledge of how to employ and utilize the weapons system so it’s as effective as it is today.

Payton echoed Shoffner’s statement, saying the culture and nature of those within the brigade and their team spirit hasn’t changed. For both leaders, the change in the culture of physical fitness stood out the most.

“Holistic Health and Fitness has been the biggest change,” Payton said. “Seeing everyone, every day, doing everything they can to exemplify that is a testament to the leaders. Those are some of the things we pushed for when we were there and now the brigade has taken it to a whole new level.”

As the day turned to night, over 450 Steel Soldiers and family members gathered for the Saint

Barbara’s Day Ball and awards continued. Soldiers in the Steel Brigade were awarded the Honorable Order of Saint Barbara. The award recognizes those individuals who stood out amongst their peers and contributed to the promotion of Field Artillery. Spouses of the Soldiers were awarded the Esteemed Artillery Order of Molly Pitcher, which recognizes individuals who demonstrate life-long commitment to support the Field Artillery community. Among the Honorable Order of Saint Barbara honorees was LTG Christopher Donahue, commanding general of the XVIII Airborne Corps, to recognize his life of service and commitment to the artillery branch as an infantry officer. As a bonus, the color guard presenting the colors at the evening ceremony was made up of the Soldiers who, just a month earlier, won the XVIII Airborne Corps Brigade Separates Best Squad Competition.

The day was a first for the 18th Field Artillery Brigade and an impactful way to start the new year. The goal is for this day to become an annual tradition for the Steel Brigade.

“The connection between today’s Soldier leader to yesterday’s Soldier leader is vital,” Harvey said, “and days like this help solidify that connection.”

“If we don’t realize we are standing on the shoulders of those who came before us, then we have this danger of falling into the trap of ‘look what I did’ or ‘look what we did,’” Harvey said. “The Army isn’t about ‘I’ or ‘We’; it is bigger than us. This is the Army’s brigade and every Soldier who has served in this brigade has some part of that success.”



COL Jonathan Harvey (L), previous Commander of the 18th Field Artillery Brigade, awards LTG Christopher Donahue, Commanding General of the XVIII Airborne Corps, with the Honorable Order of Saint Barbara at the Saint Barbara’s Ball Jan. 12, 2023, in Fayetteville, N.C. The 2023 Saint Barbara’s Ball brought an end to a day full of honor, history and lineage.