

## Deployed Pennsylvania Guard Soldiers Earn Their Combat Patch

By Staff Sgt. Jonathan Campbell, Joint Force Headquarters - Pennsylvania National Guard 27 March 2024



*U.S. Soldiers with the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, deployed as Task Force Paxton, receive their combat patches during a ceremony at Camp Simba, Kenya, March 21, 2024. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jonathan Campbell)*

CAMP SIMBA, Kenya - Task Force Paxton's command team, Lt. Col. Eric Ponzek and Command Sgt. Maj. Jason Barclay, led one of the most memorable moments of a Soldier's career at a Camp Simba ceremony March 21.

Known colloquially as the combat patching ceremony, this signifies the Soldier's service in a combat zone and forever links that Soldier and their service to the history of the unit. The official name of the patch earned is the Shoulder Sleeve Insignia Military Operations in Hostile Conditions. The Soldiers comprising Task Force Paxton, drawn from nine companies across Pennsylvania, have come together under the banner of the task force and earned this honor.

With temperatures reaching the mid-90s and the afternoon African sun shining, Barclay addressed the Soldiers on the significance of earning the patch. The tradition dates back to George Washington, who authorized

wearing the Badge of Military Merit patch, the forerunner to the Purple Heart.

The tradition of using patches to signify a Soldier's unit and rank evolved over the following two centuries and became prevalent in World War II. As Soldiers shifted from unit to unit, they would move the insignia of their old unit to signify they were combat veterans and to remember their fallen service members.

Ponzek spoke to the Soldiers about the history of the 28th Infantry Division and the significance of the patch. The Keystone, the official emblem signifying the 28th Infantry Division, was referred to as "the Bloody Bucket" by the Germans in WW2 due to its shape and red color. The nickname has stuck, and it is with great pride the Soldiers of Task Force Paxton have earned the right to wear the Keystone on their right sleeve below their American flag patch.

Many of the current Soldiers were only toddlers the last time the units of Task Force Paxton were awarded the combat patch 15 years ago. They have been trained by the officers and noncommissioned officers who previously earned the right.

The patching ceremony is an unofficial rite of passage for the American Soldier. It binds the Soldiers deployed in a combat zone as not just friends, not just Soldiers but brothers and sisters who lived and served together with common experience.