Good morning, everyone! My name is Carolyn Lee. For those who don't know, I'm executive director of The Manufacturing Institute. The Institute is an organization dedicated to building the manufacturing workforce of today and inspiring the manufacturing workforce of tomorrow.

We've launched a lot of great programs to match manufacturing career opportunities with those possessing the grit, talent and skill to make a true success of them.

That's why I came here in January, to inaugurate our newest, veterans-focused initiative: Heroes MAKE America.

Ten weeks later, here I am again. Ten weeks later, here I am to congratulate our first class of Heroes as they prepare to graduate and take on new opportunities in the manufacturing industry.

Thank you, all, for being here with us today to celebrate them.

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It's great to be back here at Fort Riley. It's also great to have so many supporters in the room. There's the president of the Kansas Chamber, Alan Cobb… There's Lieutenant General Perry Wiggins, retired, the head of the Governor's Military Council…And there's Levi Perkins, assistant director of the Labor Department’s VETS program…

I know there are so many other sponsors and partners here, too. Don't worry, I plan to recognize some of our good friends later this morning. For now, though, let me just thank everyone for coming.

Our event this morning is really important.

It's about honoring 13 soon-to-be veterans who have been preparing the last few months to serve their country once more.

It's about welcoming 13 additional veterans who will soon embark upon a similar journey.

They've each walked a unique path to get here.

They've each worked hard.
And this morning, we will not only recognize what they’ve achieved so far but also welcome them into a new—and, we hope, fulfilling and rewarding—phase of their lives.

Before we kick the program off, though, let me just begin with what seems like an obvious point.

It’s something we all know intrinsically.

It’s something we still fail to recognize nearly as often as we should.

Our men and women in uniform put everything on the line for this country.

For many in our armed forces, that is each and every day. Serving selflessly. Sacrificing willingly.

Never truly knowing whether that last dash out the door, that last kiss on the cheek, that last moment of joy might well become a loved one’s final memory of them.

And still, they carry forward. Why do they do what they do? For their country. For us.

The continuing sacrifice of these men and women is truly remarkable. The same is true of their families.

So, let’s just take a moment once again to recognize these heroes and their families for everything they do for our country—for everything they do for us.

It really goes without saying, but our country owes a lot to its heroes in uniform.

Funny thing is, they don’t ask much in return.

Mostly, they want the opportunity to serve—with honor and respect, with the tools and training to get the job done, with the means to make a decent life for their families.

When these heroes come home, they should have similar opportunities.

That’s what I believe. That’s what The Manufacturing Institute believes. That’s what the Heroes MAKE America program is all about.

It’s why we’re here today.

The mission of Heroes is to connect America’s best with meaningful careers when they come home.

More than 200,000 U.S. service members return to civilian life each year.
This is a group of men and women who are used to putting their talents to work in a mission larger than themselves, who are accustomed to working in teams and who rightly expect meaningful careers with fair compensation—and a little bit of action—when they return to civilian life.

No wonder manufacturing careers are often such a good fit.

Today’s manufacturing sector is not the same industry your parents or grandparents might have known. We’re not really talking about “white collar” or “blue collar” jobs anymore—we’re talking about “new collar” jobs that require training but not necessarily a four-year degree.

Many of these jobs are high-tech.

Most lead to interesting and rewarding careers, fulfilling lives and little or no student debt.

They pay well, too.

So these are great jobs, and they are ready to be filled today.

In fact, there are about 427,000 open jobs in manufacturing at this very moment.

Moreover, according to a recent study by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute, it’s expected that about 2 million manufacturing jobs are going to go unfilled over the next few years—that’s 2 million out of the 3.5 million or so we expect to be created.

Why?

Manufacturers are simply unable to find enough men and women with the right skills and training to fill them.

This is the so-called skills gap.

This is something that the organization I lead is intently focused on addressing. At our core, The Manufacturing Institute is all about bringing more men and women into the manufacturing industry.

That’s why we’ve launched initiatives to engage students and inspire the manufacturers of the future…

That’s why we work hard to attract and retain more female manufacturers…

And that’s why we inaugurated this powerful initiative, Heroes MAKE America, right here at Fort Riley—home of the Big Red One.
Heroes is designed to connect more manufacturers to highly qualified veteran candidates—and it’s designed to give veterans the tools and training they need to not only find that perfect manufacturing job, but excel in it.

And the skills manufacturers are looking for often align well with the unique, in-demand experience that men and women in uniform bring home with them.

Just look at the graduating veterans we’re recognizing today.

We’ve got Humvee mechanics and tank technicians… Battlefield construction engineers, infantry soldiers and supply-chain specialists… Even an expert in biowarfare… Skills like these may not all seem relevant to the manufacturing sector.

Well, they are.

Manufacturers need builders and fixers who like to take things apart.

They need problem-solvers who like to put things back together.

They need men and women with qualities like loyalty, resilience and dedication—who possess the drive to surmount any problem and the will to make every impossibility possible.

Of course, it doesn’t hurt if you’ve also got a certain appreciation for punctuality, tidiness and efficiency.

Well, just look before you.

Here are your builders and fixers.

Here are your problem-solvers.

Here’s one punctual, clean-cut, efficient group of guys, and they’re ready to put their experience to work in a new field with new challenges and new opportunities.

Now, with the training they just received here as part of the Heroes program, they have the right qualifications and certifications they’ll need to succeed and thrive in the industry.

Over the last 10 weeks, they’ve worked to earn 14 college credits and nine industry certifications. They’ve received career training in everything from résumé writing, to
social media management, to personal finance. They’ve also participated in a range of networking opportunities, facility tours, job interviews and assessments.

And they’re crushing it.

Already, our graduating class has landed more than 50 interviews—so far.

Already, these soldiers have netted nearly a dozen job offers—so far.

And, already, about half of our graduates have a job offer they plan to accept—before they’ve even graduated.

These are good jobs, too, with respected organizations.

Companies like Norfolk Southern, and USAA, and Goodyear.

And fantastic institutions like our educational partner Washburn Tech.

In fact, several members of this graduating class have decided to head on to further training or schooling from here, which will lead them to additional opportunities.

All of this is great news. It’s a testament to the hard work of our inaugural graduating class of Heroes.

We’ll recognize each of them individually in just a few minutes, but for now, let’s give them a round of applause.

Let’s recognize the incoming class of Heroes, too.

A few weeks ago, at the National Association of Manufacturers’ Board of Directors meeting, two Heroes students came to address more than 200 of our country’s top manufacturing executives to explain the value and promise of the Heroes MAKE America program.

The audience they spoke to was made up largely of chairmen, CEOs and presidents. These executives represented companies big and small. They helm firms spanning the entirety of the manufacturing sector. And I’ll tell you something - those bigshots hung on just about every word from two of our Heroes, Quantae and Dustin.

Quantae spoke about his desire to serve. That’s why he joined the Army in the first place, he said, and that’s what he wants to continue doing into the future.

Dustin explained how skills and values developed in the military translate to opportunities in civilian life. A career in manufacturing, he said, represents his opportunity to take care of his family—and it means they’ll be able to build a home.
In short, these soldiers told their stories—just as Owen did a few moments ago.

They explained what this program meant to them as veterans.

They explained what a career in manufacturing would mean for their futures.

It was a powerful discussion, and I think it really underlined not only the value but more importantly the promise and the potential of this important initiative.

I was certainly proud of them.

I know their Heroes instructor, Jarrett Allen, was, too.

Jarrett worked hard to train this first, amazing group of graduates. Now, as many of you know, he recently accepted a position with Goodyear. It seems the Heroes program works so well, even its instructors get hired away. Well, that’s great news for you, Jarrett. Less great for us. But thank you for everything you’ve done.

Let me tell you about our incoming instructor, though. Willie McClary just received his diplomas a few moments ago. Well, now he’s on task to ensure the next class of Heroes walks across this same stage just as he did.

This is a big challenge, Willie. We’re grateful you’re here to take it on. Best of luck to you. We’re really glad to have you on board.

There are so many folks who made this day possible.

The staff of The Manufacturing Institute, for one. What a great team. It takes a lot to pull off an event like this. You often don’t see how hard they work behind the scenes, but—believe me—they do. Thanks again, team.

And, of course, let’s again recognize our speakers - Command Sergeant Major Bristow, Staff Sargent Zechman, Dean Coco.

As you know, the Heroes program was developed in partnership with friends like Dean Coco at Washburn Tech as well as the U.S. Army Soldier for Life – Transition Assistance Program. We have many other partners and friends, too, like USO Pathfinder, Kansas Works, Kansas State University, Wade’s World Financial and many manufacturing companies—including those represented here in the room.

And, because dozens of leading manufacturers across the state committed to supporting the program as well, we were able to launch Heroes right here at Fort Riley on January 22. As Command Sergeant Major Andrew Bristow said earlier, we plan to run the program four times a year here moving forward.
Additionally, I have a further exciting announcement to make this morning. This summer, we will be expanding the opportunities of the Heroes program by launching at Fort Hood in Texas. This is really exciting because it means The Manufacturing Institute and our Heroes partners can train even more service members for rewarding careers in manufacturing.

This is great news, and it underlines the fact that, with company support, we can do even more to grow the pipeline from military to manufacturing.

Indeed, as you know, The Manufacturing Institute relies on contributions from manufacturing leaders.

There are many supporting us here today, like our friends from the Arconic Foundation, and we truly thank everyone for your support. We’re so grateful for it, and more veterans will now get the chance to put their talents to work in rewarding, affirming, well-paying careers because of it.

Again, thank you.

It’s clear to me that the Heroes program has nowhere to go but up from here.

I believe it’s going to be a game-changer for an industry that really needs skilled workers.

I believe it’s going to be a life-changer for the veterans and their families who continue to fill these jobs.

I think it’s going to keep expanding, keep growing and keep making a difference.

I couldn’t be more excited about our possibilities moving forward.

And I couldn’t be prouder of our graduates here today.

So today, let’s again offer our sincere congratulations to the first graduating Heroes MAKE America class.

We know you’re going to accomplish amazing things.

We hope you’ll keep us apprised of everything you achieve.

And know that we at the Institute plan to continue offering whatever support and guidance you need as you continue your journey.

Congratulations to you; it’s well-deserved.
Thank you also to those who have supported us and these soldiers through this program. We could not have done this without the support of our nation’s manufacturers, teachers, friends and family.

Now, let’s listen to one more song from our Army band, and then I’d like to welcome everyone to a lunch reception down the hall to celebrate the graduating Heroes MAKE America class.

We hope to see you there.

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