

On September 17, 2026, 265 law enforcement officers crossed the stage at the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. This was the 299th session of the FBI National Academy, drawing men and women from nearly every corner of the country: 44 states and the District of Columbia, to be exact. Among them was our very own Lt. Joshua Pinkard, the first person to ever attend the class from the Leake County Sheriff's Office. The class roster was a patchwork of backgrounds: 29 international officers representing 28 countries, along with members from five military organizations and four federal civilian groups.

The National Academy has built a reputation for academic rigor that stretches far beyond our borders. For ten weeks, participants dive into advanced courses in communication, leadership, and even the less glamorous but essential topics of wellness and fitness. Admission is not for the untested; these officers arrive with an average of 21 years on the job, and most will return to their agencies to take on executive roles, armed with new tools and perhaps a fresh perspective.

FBI Director Kashyap P. Patel delivered remarks at the ceremony. Class spokesperson Darnel Robinson of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., represented the graduating officers. Shaquille O'Neal also delivered remarks as a guest speaker.

Instruction comes from a mix of FBI Academy staff, special agents, and others whose credentials are as impressive as their résumés; many are recognized experts in their fields, not just here but abroad. Since 1972, students have had the chance to earn college credit through the University of Virginia, which puts its stamp of approval on every course offered at the Academy. Lt. Pinkard used this opportunity to start his Master's level education.

Lt. Pinkard called it the training of a lifetime, and after hearing what he endured, I'm inclined to believe him. Five Master's-level classes packed into ten weeks would test anyone's stamina, and the physical demands were no less daunting. Pinkard dropped about 20 pounds during his stay, a testament to the program's rigors. He also finished the Yellow Brick Road, a 6.2-mile run that starts with Marine Corps obstacles and owes its whimsical name to the yellow-painted roots and rocks that line the course, courtesy of the Marines at Quantico.

Since its founding in 1935, the FBI National Academy has seen 57,461 graduates pass through its doors. The Academy itself sits at Quantico, sharing space with the training grounds for new special agents and intelligence analysts, a reminder that, for all its tradition, this is still very much a working school.