

Dept. of Military Affairs: Even amidst COVID-19 pandemic, units complete annual training to maintain readiness for state and federal missions

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FORT MCCOY, Wis. — Every Wisconsin National Guard Soldier and Airman completes a minimum of two weeks of training every year in addition to their regular weekend drills. This annual training looks different for Soldiers and Airmen depending on their military occupation, but the training's important contribution to unit readiness stays the same even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several Wisconsin National Guard units recently completed their traditional annual training requirements, and still others will complete theirs in the coming weeks.

“COVID still remains a significant health concern, yet units must prioritize annual training for the sake of sustaining proficiency in mission essential tasks, and affording service members the opportunity to maintain a ‘good’ year toward retirement; as most activations have been served in a state active duty capacity,” Lt. Col. G. David Brown, commander of the 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion (BEB), said.

During annual training, National Guard units primarily concentrate on tasks that support their federal roles as the primary combat reserve to either the U.S. Army or U.S. Air Force. Preparing to support the federal mission is ongoing and units have had to adjust their training to conduct it safely in the age of COVID.

“As a commander, Soldier safety and the health and well-being of the organization on-whole remains my number one focus,” said Brown. “As a result, measures have been enacted to mitigate risk and preserve the vigor of the force while still meeting needed training objectives to ensure the BEB’s continued ability to perform state and federal missions.”

The 173rd recently completed its annual training at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. The unit provides engineering and other combat support to the 32nd “Red Arrow” Infantry Brigade Combat Team. Unit members practiced steel cutting charges, detonating Bangalore torpedoes, breaching obstacles and qualifying on M-4 rifles. Soldiers completed individual readiness skills and mission essential tasks while keeping accountability of both personnel and equipment.

“Although the training concept and design may be different from a ‘normal’ annual training period, our mission, and my charge to unit leadership has been to provide a valuable training experience to Soldiers,” said Brown.

In addition to annual training, the 173rd over the past few months has been activated for numerous missions across Wisconsin in support of the Guard’s state mission. Numerous members have supported the state’s COVID-19 response by serving on specimen collection teams along with providing logistical and planning support. Soldiers in the unit also worked at polling sites during two elections and responded to assist local authorities in June during a period of civil unrest.

Several of the 173rd’s troops supporting these missions had only recently arrived to the unit. Pfc/ Lauren Vildberg had just returned from initial training late this spring when she was activated for a civil unrest mission in Madison. Despite never attending a single drill before activation, she was prepared and stands proud of being a member of the National Guard.

“I feel very proud wearing this uniform,” she said. “I feel very happy being a part of the Army family.”

Whether currently serving Wisconsin through mobilizations, or preparing individual and unit readiness through annual training, Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen, such as those belonging to the 173rd, stand ready to fully support the Guard’s dual mission.

“While missions become increasingly more complex and frequent in these

uncharted times,” said Brown. “I remain confident and poised because of the dedication, determination and discipline of young women and men within the BEB, who time and time again, have displayed a steadfast commitment to both our state and nation with their willingness to respond when our fellow citizens call for support.”