

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Part of Wisconsin Army Guard battalion completes Afghanistan deployment

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Returning early from their Afghanistan deployment and still not quite home, approximately 150 Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry Regiment arrived safely at the Minnesota Air National Guard's 133rd Airlift Wing.

The returning Soldiers are part of a planned drawdown of troops in Afghanistan announced earlier this year. About 250 Soldiers from the 128th Infantry are continuing their mission supporting the U.S. Army's 3rd Security Forces Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and are expected to return later this year.

The 128th Infantry deployed on a "guardian angel" mission, providing force protection for numerous engagements between SFAB advisors and other coalition forces, contractors and Afghan troops. They replaced the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, which was the first National Guard battalion to partner with an active Army security force assistance brigade.

"We left in July and we came back a little early," Maj. Michael Olson, the officer in charge of the returning troops, told the formation after arriving in St. Paul. "For some of you that's great. For some of you that wanted to stay a little bit longer, it reflects on your dedication to service."

Boyceville, Wisconsin resident Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Ward of Company D served in Kabul on what was his third deployment in 18 years of service. His previous deployments were to Iraq.

"Afghanistan was a lot different than Iraq," Ward said. "The terrain, the weather, even the cultures are different. The type of mission was different."

The guardian angel mission required what Ward described as more passive yet more in-depth than a standard infantry mission.

"You had to have a lot of knowledge of human being interaction versus just knowledge of tactics and terrain," Ward said. "It was a different mindset."

Sgt. Logan Burke, an Altoona, Wisconsin resident assigned to the Headquarters Company's Detachment 1 as a mortarman, also completed his third deployment. However, he was in the active Army for the first two deployments.

"The Guard is a lot faster paced," Burke said. "We have a very short time to train. It's a lot shorter and a little bit harder training."

Spc. Joshua Bergquist of Company C said the deployment required flexibility.

"There were a lot of changes throughout, and it was really fluid," Bergquist said. "It was a great experience. You learn to cope with things being away from people and being in a different culture."

His father, Brian Bergquist, of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, was filled with pride and gratitude as the Soldiers returned to the Eau Claire armory.

"It means everything, because we're a very patriotic family to begin with," he said. "It's not often that you can look at your child and honestly say that they're your hero and you look up to them in a way that they probably looked up to you growing up. But now the tables are turned."

Command Sgt. Maj. Rafael Conde, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's senior enlisted leader, told the returning Soldiers that they were the state's most highly trained Soldiers.

"Right now you are the highest standard," Conde said. "I need you to take that experience back to the units and make sure you train everyone to your standards."

"You all are now part of the next great chapter of the history of the Red Arrow and the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team," said Brig. Gen. Joane Mathews, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army. "And what a great book it is."

Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, attended his first troop homecoming ceremony as the commander of the Wisconsin National Guard. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, families were not present at the 133rd Airlift Wing. Families were waiting at local Wisconsin National Guard armories in Eau Claire, Menomonie, Abbotsford, New Richmond, Rice Lake, Arcadia, Onalaska, River Falls, and Madison when the Soldiers arrived by bus.

"I want to take this opportunity and thank them from the bottom of my heart for their contribution and support of all of you, the men and women of the 32nd while you were gone," Knapp said. "They could not have done it without you and we can't do it without them. And our country can't do it without you."

Gov. Tony Evers addressed the returning troops via a pre-recorded message.

"On behalf of the whole state of Wisconsin, we're so thrilled to have you back on our great state's home soil," Eves said. "While I know that your mission was seemingly cut short, you have accomplished so much and represented Wisconsin so well during your deployment."

In addition to the remainder of the 128th Infantry still in Afghanistan, more than 500 Wisconsin National Guard troops remain deployed overseas including the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team headquarters in Ukraine, the 829th Engineer Company in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the 924th Engineer Facilities Detachment in Kuwait and the 1967th Contracting Team in the Horn of Africa.

Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers and Airmen are also serving as part of the whole-of-Wisconsin effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus.