

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard engineer unit keeps vital Kuwait base running during pandemic

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CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — This large logistical base located outside of Kuwait City near the Saudi Arabian border is a vital part of U.S. operations in the Middle East, and serves as a transit station for troops entering or leaving the theater of operations. Earlier this year, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 924th Engineer Facilities Detachment deployed there to function as the base's department of public works.

At the 14-person unit's Jan. 16 sendoff ceremony, detachment commander Lt. Col. William Kesselring reassured family members and friends that their deploying Soldiers would be safe in Kuwait.

"It's kind of like we're deploying to Germany," he said at the time. "It's a little bit hotter with a bit more sand."

But safe and uneventful are two different things, and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the 924th's mission.

"In general, life has been good, but performing our DPW functions in support of the base has been a challenge," Kesselring said July 29. "A few months ago we basically shut most services down to around 20 percent due to losing contractors who got locked off base with COVID, and we had to pick up a lot of slack and tightly coordinate the limited resources we've had left."

“Even with that, we have still completed hundreds of work orders per week and have been triaging by responding to maintenance failures and leaving many things unserved.”

As Kuwait began to open back up during the pandemic, Camp Arifjan services increased as well, and some projects that had halted were starting back up.

Capt. Jessica Burch, unit architect, described the 924th as the heart of the base.

“While other sections can survive by reducing office hours during a crisis or restrictions, our staff has had to step up and work far beyond,” she said. “We have diligently worked to plan for a successful future and establish processes that will long outlive our time here.”

Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Pitsch said one of the challenges has been learning the contracting process for military construction projects at Camp Arifjan.

“Working with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation as a construction project manager has prepared me for the execution of projects,” Pitsch said, “but working in Kuwait with standards and techniques that I am not used to challenged me to think outside of the box on engineering solutions in construction that are not used in normal construction practices in the U.S.”

Pitsch said the importance of developing stakeholder collaboration — contractors, customers and the U.S. military — on military construction projects is a lesson he will carry on to future missions.

“Building good working relationships with units and contractors on Camp Arifjan to advance construction projects on critical military facilities makes the mission more attainable by using good lines of communication and understanding that all stakeholders are working in unity towards the same mission goals,” he said.

Sgt. 1st Class Mitchell Engelke offered a similar, but simpler observation: “Trust, but verify!”

Burch added, “Expertise in a particular discipline is much less important than problem solving and networking skills.”

“I believe we have earned the trust from everyone on Camp Arifjan,” said Sgt. 1st Class Kevin Brehmer, “and we will leave this camp better than we found it.”

Kesselring acknowledged that the 924th has received constant accolades from units on base.

“Several [team members] have received Impact Awards for their efforts above and beyond,” Kesselring said. “The Area Support Group deputy commander, who has been here for eight years, has also said we are the best DPW that has been here during his tenure.

“Challenges abound, and the team is knocking it out of the park.”

Though the deployment has had its challenges, unit morale has remained strong, according to Burch.

“We each have good days and bad days,” she said. “The 924th has formed into a genuine family with mild rivalries, inter-section support, and respect for everything we have accomplished in this short but demanding mobilization. Most of us are ready for life to return to normal beyond COVID restrictions, especially the gym access.”

“For the most part, we do everything together,” Brehmer added, “such as card night every Saturday, frequent barbecues, and even working out as a group on the PT field.”

Pitsch said the weekly Saturday night card games provides the detachment an opportunity to talk about non-mission issues, such as news from home.

“This family mentality has helped keep the detachment focused and operational throughout the deployment,” Pitsch said.

“The Wisconsin euchre-playing tradition is strong,” Kesselring said.