

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard unit continues multinational training mission in Ukraine

Posted on Friday, May 22, 2020

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers serving in Task Force Juvigny are continuing with their mission to train and advise members of the Armed Forces Ukraine even in the midst of a global coronavirus pandemic.

The approximately 160 Soldiers — many from the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team's Headquarters Company — arrived at Ukraine's Combat Training Center-Yavoriv last November to head up the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U), an effort that includes NATO allies from Canada, Denmark, Great Britain, Lithuania and Poland. The goal of the training is to improve NATO interoperability with Ukraine's military.

The unit's deployment to Ukraine is one of several ongoing missions in which Wisconsin National Guard troops are serving. Approximately 250 Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry remain in Afghanistan, while troops from the 924th Engineer Facilities Detachment and 829th Engineer Company are serving in the Middle East and troops from the 1967th Contracting Team are serving in the Horn of Africa.

Meanwhile, more than 1,400 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen are on duty serving in Wisconsin as part of the state's ongoing COVID-19 pandemic response.

Maj. Joshua McAuliffe, a brigade intelligence advisor from Madison, Wisconsin, said the JMTG-U is preparing the Armed Forces Ukraine to run CTC Yavoriv independently, as well as support interoperable training events.

“How that’s achieved changes, based on critical events and assessments,” McAuliffe said. Initially, he measured progress by the ability to train such concepts as the military decision-making process, military staff processes and tactical operations center execution.

“If not fully accomplished, I believe that it is close,” McAuliffe said. “I also believe that we’ve developed sound benchmarks for greater institutional development.”

Command Sgt. Maj. John Dietzler, a senior enlisted advisor from Green Bay, Wisconsin, noted that the JMTG-U mission began in 2015.

“Data from previous U.S. units as well as ours shows continued progression towards a fully capable combat training center,” Dietzler said.

Capt. Adam Deal, a company advisor from Waupun, Wisconsin, works closely with the combat training center staff to improve processes and the quality of training provided to the units who rotate through the center.

“The hardest part has been the inability to advise in the field due to COVID-19,” Deal said. “As company advisors, we make our biggest impact in the field working with the observer/controller/trainers. Not being able to see them on a regular basis has made rapport-building and the ability to provide recommendations and feedback difficult.”

In addition to limiting face-to-face interactions between trainers and Ukrainian military officials, safety precautions have placed other restrictions on Task Force Juvigny. Regular mail delivery has stopped, and scheduled leave and passes are suspended. Gyms and barbershops are closed, and recreational trips to nearby Lviv in western Ukraine are also suspended.

“I would really like to have been able to enjoy the area more,” Wolfertz conceded. “However, these are extraordinary times, and our safety is more important. Not so much different from previous deployments, now.”

For 1st Lt. Ka Vue, a personnel officer from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, visiting Lviv offered more than sightseeing.

“I made it a ritual to get pho” — a traditional Vietnamese noodle soup — “in town at one of the only pho places I’ve come across in Ukraine,” Vue said. “This gives me a taste of home and always reminds me of how grounded I am to my [Hmong]

identity and my family back home.”

Sgt. 1st Class Kirsten Schultz, an operations advisor from Marinette, Wisconsin, said she is trying to make the best of the restrictions.

“I’ve been trying to not let that get me down,” she said. “I have been telling myself that it is mission first, and that is the sole purpose we are here.”

Schultz and Vue described themselves as introverts, so social distancing has not necessarily been detrimental for them. Dietzler said he is more conscious of his proximity to others as well as the number of people in a room. Deal said he is a big fan of personal space.

“Six feet of separation is perfectly fine with me,” he said.

Wolfertz acknowledged that social distancing requirements at the combat training center has been challenging, “but as with anything, it becomes routine,” he said.

McAuliffe also indicated the pandemic has proven to be the toughest part of this deployment, but provided a stoic response.

“I just follow the guidelines published in task force operation orders,” McAuliffe explained. “No adaptation necessary.”

Col. John Oakley, the 32nd IBCT and Joint Task Force Juvigny commander, said that the prevention measures taken in Ukraine have thus far resulted in no Soldiers contracting the coronavirus.

“I want [the family members back home] to know that there’s one less thing that they need to worry about, and that’s the safety and security of their Soldiers here,” Oakley said in a video posted in the Joint Task Force Multinational Group-Ukraine Facebook page.

Schultz enjoyed working with her Ukrainian counterparts on this deployment.

“It was, and is, a really cool experience to be able to see their ways of teaching and how they tackle the tasks they have to teach and observe,” she said. “There is more than one way to do tactics and how to teach it. They were very receptive to see how we do things, and I feel we all have learned another way of doing things with observing how they teach.”

Deal said working with Ukrainians has been the best part of the deployment.

“I have gained valuable insight into the tactics and methodologies of how they conduct operations,” Deal said. “Although we may differ in how we would approach a certain tactical problem, I feel confident that we would be able to work together in a joint effort.”

Schultz said that linguists are not always available to translate English into Russian, and vice-versa.

“Trying to communicate at times has been difficult,” she said.

Dietzler interacts mostly with senior enlisted counterparts in the Armed Forces Ukraine.

“It’s interesting to hear during our discussions, through a linguist, how similar our challenges are,” Dietzler said. “All of the interactions with my counterparts have been genuinely cordial.”

Wolfertz said his experience working with Ukrainian counterparts at range control has been delightful.

“I’ve learned a great deal about how the Ukrainian forces do business,” he said. “The biggest difference I’ve noticed is that the information flow is a very top-down approach, versus the approach the U.S. Army uses.”

Staff Sgt. Joshua Saffert, s Cameron, Wisconsin resident, and an executive assistant to the chief of staff, said meeting the Ukrainian people and experiencing their culture has been the most rewarding part of his deployment.

“I have had the opportunity to be part of Ukraine’s future,” he observed. “As big or small a part that is, I am here and part of that — no one can ever take that away.”

Sgt. First Class Jeremy Harder, a senior culinary manager from Eau Claire, said Task Force Juvigny was building relationships and making progress with the JMTG-U mission before the pandemic.

“I feel we will leave [the combat training center] better than we found it,” Harder said.