

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard Badgers provide wildfire support with California Guard

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FRESNO, Calif. — It took almost four days for two flight teams from the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 1st Battalion (Assault), 147th Aviation Regiment, 64th Troop Command, to fly their UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters more than 1,700 miles from their Madison, Wisconsin facility to Sacramento, California, where they commenced mission support for the Golden State's recent outbreak of wildfires.

And since that early-September trek, they haven't really stopped flying, garnering one mission after another to give California Army National Guard aviators — as well as a slew of other firefighting agencies — much needed assistance during California's worst fire season ever.

"It's a very rewarding experience when people ask for help and we can go and provide that assistance," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Mike Tomblin, 147th pilot in command. "When we got asked, it's just part of our nature to want to go do it. This helps grow the unit. The number of experiences we get from here certainly helps with our unit back home."

Shortly after that four-day venture, where they stopped at routed locations to refuel two UH-60M Black Hawks and recover for the next flight, the team achieved validation from California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). CAL FIRE, through the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), is the leading agency in wildfire response.

In less than a week the band of “Badger” brothers were airborne, dropping thousands of gallons of water on the ever-growing Creek Fire in Fresno County. Their need expanded to the Castle Fire — a section of the SQF Complex Fire in Tulare County, California — where they dumped even more water on the nearby blaze.

“The Wisconsin team has been a true value added to Joint Task Force Phoenix,” said Col. David L. Hall, commander, Cal Guard’s 40th Combat Aviation Brigade and JTF Phoenix commanding officer. “They were recently singled out by CAL FIRE due to their expertise and seamless integration into the firefighting team here in California. We are lucky to have them out here.”

Being new to the mission in California, there are a number of things this Wisconsin crew has learned, such as flying with a CAL FIRE military helicopter manager aboard and marking their aircraft with pink electric salmon paint for visibility. They also bring differences such as flying a 660-gallon firefighting bucket with “long line,” an extended cable that adds distance from their helicopter. Cal Guard Black Hawk aviators use shorter lines, or “belly hooking,” but use longer cables for CH-47 Chinook water buckets.

“We do things differently, such as the long lines under our aircraft, whereas we understand the California Guard doesn’t,” said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Andrew Wickland, 147th pilot in command and a Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, resident. “CAL FIRE guys didn’t know how to utilize us in the beginning, but then they came to appreciate what the long lines bring to the table.”

“Long lines protect us from possible flare ups from the fire,” Tomblin added. “They also allow us to get into areas where trees might be around them, or stuff like that. We’ve been doing long lines the entire time I’ve been in the Guard.”

California faces its worst fire season ever. Four of the five largest wildfires in state history occurred this year, all of them happening since July. Hundreds of local, state and federal agencies have responded to this emergency, and neighboring and adjacent states have sent firefighting support — ground crews and extensive aerial support, such as unmanned aerial vehicles — to the fight.

The Wisconsin Guard is one of the furthest east of the states to respond to California’s call.

“For us, our fire season is really short, typically,” Wickland explained. “It’s nowhere near as challenging as what’s out here. We knew that before coming here. There’s a significant difference as to what we have back home.”

In less than two weeks, the Black Hawk teams combined to drop nearly 80 buckets of water or more than 52,000 gallons on areas too tough for ground crews to reach in Central California fires. They were expected to transfer to Northern California, where more fires have ignited and threatened life and property.

The veteran pilots credited their home unit, stating a significant number of volunteers responded to the initial request to help California. It came down to bringing experienced pilots to match with knowledgeable crew chiefs and maintenance personnel.

“Without the crew chiefs, there’s no way we can do our missions,” added 1st Lt. Cole D. Hamilton, Wisconsin liaison officer. “Once we get over the drop site or dip sites, they’re the ones really controlling the aircraft. They’re telling you ‘Hey I need you to come left; now I need you to come down five feet; I need you to hold the aircraft where it’s at.’”

Tomblin said this mission is a little personal since his sister, Tamela Murphy, had to evacuate her Scotts Valley, California, home during the CZU Complex Fire a few weeks ago. She went back to Wisconsin around the same time Tomblin, of Waunakee, Wisconsin, got official notification to leave for California.

“Certainly when the call comes, being in the Wisconsin Guard, we want to help,” Tomblin said.

“The biggest thing we’ll bring back is experience,” Hamilton added. “We’ll be much better an asset for our (Department of Natural Resources) when fires pop up back home and they request assistance from the Guard.”

The two Black Hawks and 15 Soldiers departed for California Sept. 11, and the crews remain on duty.