

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin's adjutant general reconnects with hometown while visiting Guard COVID-19 test site

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ANTIGO, Wis. – Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, visited a Wisconsin National Guard COVID-19 specimen collection site June 4 in his hometown of Antigo, Wis.

In his first visit to Antigo since his March 5 appointment as adjutant general, Knapp also toured local businesses and talked to residents about serving the state and community in which he grew up.

"It's awesome to be back in Antigo," said Knapp. "It was such a great place to grow up in, and it's where I learned my values and work ethic."

Knapp last visited his hometown in uniform shortly after 9/11 when he returned to talk to students at local schools about his military experience. At the time he was stationed with the 391st Fighter Squadron at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho.

Fellow Antigo native Marc Couturier was one of the third graders that Knapp spoke to nearly 20 years ago. He now works for Wisconsin Emergency Management, an agency that Knapp leads in addition to his role as commander of the Wisconsin National Guard. Couturier traveled with Knapp to Antigo as part of his duties assisting with the state's COVID-19 efforts.

"I remember that day we had a gentleman from the Air Force come to school," said

Couturier. “This was 9/11 and I was a kid, so I didn’t really understand what was happening in the world. All you see is this guy in a flight suit and helmet and all the pictures of an F-15, which I thought was the coolest thing.”

Couturier never thought that Knapp’s talk would connect to today.

“I never thought as a kid growing up here that I would be landing at the Antigo airport in a Black Hawk [helicopter], let alone with the adjutant general of Wisconsin.”

Knapp’s comments that day also inspired his interest in aviation.

“I don’t remember the exact words he said, but hearing his stories of flying introduced me to aviation,” Couturier noted. “Shortly after, my love for flying grew. I asked my mom for airplane toys, and even now I try to go to the EAA Air Venture every year.”

Knapp and Couturier continued to connect during the trip, which included a visit to the Langlade County Historical Society Museum. The museum displays the F-15 flight suit worn by Knapp – the village’s graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy. After talking further, both discovered that they had had the same elementary school teacher at Crestwood Elementary.

Knapp also stopped by his favorite hometown bakery and bought donuts for every Wisconsin National Guard Citizen Soldier and Citizen Airman working at a COVID-19 specimen collection site at the Langlade County Fairgrounds. The site was one of 13 operated that day by the Wisconsin National Guard throughout the state.

“I believe in this mission,” said Spc. Zach Harder, a cannoneer with C Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery and a full-time economics student at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. “This specimen collection mission is important because the more tests and the more samples you can get, means more data, and a better understanding of this disease.”

After delivering donuts, Knapp coined three Soldiers and Airmen for their outstanding work and their contribution to the Wisconsin National Guard’s nearly three-month effort assisting the state respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was on this day that the Guard had surpassed 100,000 COVID-19 specimens collected in Wisconsin for testing.

“One hundred thousand tests by the Wisconsin National Guard is a great milestone,” said Knapp. “It really speaks to the dedication and professionalism of the Guard troops that have been testing for the last number of weeks.”