

Dept. of Military Affairs: Badger State Soldiers continue battling wildfires in western states

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Soldiers that left Wisconsin in mid-August to support California and Washington with firefighting operations continue to battle wildfires, and their mission will continue through mid-September.

One helicopter and six personnel from several units assigned to West Bend's Army Aviation Support Facility #2 are supporting Washington with medevac support, while two aircraft and 17 personnel from Madison's 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation are assisting the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFire) with general aviation support and firefighting operations.

"The mission to California is to support CALFire wildland firefighting," said Lt. Col. Dan Allen, commander of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation in Madison. "The aircraft will utilize Bambi Buckets capable of carrying up to 660 gallons of water and dropping water where needed."

To date, Wisconsin crews flying UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters from the 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation have dropped 184 buckets, totaling approximately 130,000 gallons of water on the Caldor fire, which has burned 210,000 acres. Soldiers have accumulated 94 hours of flight time supporting the mission.

Soldiers are working around the clock receiving briefs, preparing themselves and their equipment, waiting on stand-by, launching as needed, picking up water and bringing it where it's requested. After concluding their missions, the work continues with refueling, shutting down, filling out paperwork, and finally inspecting the aircraft throughout the night.

However, 1st Lt. Meredith Porter, the officer in charge and a pilot with the 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation, said the demanding work schedules have not affected the soldiers in a negative way.

"All our soldiers are very happy to be here to help in any way they can," she said. "Despite long days, morale is high and everybody knows they are here doing what they can to help and to learn."

"In this mission, the biggest thing I've learned is to be flexible on adjusting our techniques and methods for performing the mission," said Sgt. Zachary Hoy, a crew chief in the same unit as Porter. "Different from last year, we got to try out a different style water bucket and we, as a crew, had to make some changes to smooth out the process of filling the bucket with water. It was a challenge learning how this bucket behaves differently from our buckets we brought from home."

Porter echoed Hoy's statement on the learning curve with the water buckets and adds that she has learned about a couple other aspects as well.

"Flying with water buckets is a challenging mode of flight," she said. "The environmental conditions combined with a few thousand pounds of water in the bucket makes every control input more important. Water here is an incredibly valuable asset, so there is little room for error when dropping water on fire lines. I have no doubt I've become a better pilot."

"Wildfire management is an incredibly complex operation," she added. "I have done more interagency work on this mission than I have ever done, and I have learned a lot from the other Soldiers and civilians I have worked with here."

"I have also learned a great deal about wildfires and the impact they have on people who live in areas like this. I am blown away by the resilience of the local citizens, and I feel compelled to do more to support fire safety and forest management all around."

Hoy feels very privileged and thankful to be a part of this support effort.

"It is such a fulfilling, cool mission, and it's great we have been able to bring more people from back home to gain this valuable and meaningful experience," he said.

Wisconsin Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk crews train annually for wildfire suppression missions.