

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Called to preserve the peace - Wisconsin's 32nd Division mobilizes for Cold War duty 60 years ago

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Six decades ago, approximately 10,000 Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers answered the nation's call as two global superpowers were locked in a Cold War showdown in the divided city of Berlin.

Wisconsin's 32nd Infantry Division — the famous Red Arrow Division of two world wars — mobilized Oct. 15, 1961 for a year of training at Fort Lewis, Washington, where they became the first National Guard unit mobilized to advance American foreign policy that aimed to prevent a third world war.

At the end of World War II, the four major allied powers divided Germany into four sections, with the Soviet-held portion becoming East Germany. Berlin, the capital of Nazi Germany, was located in East Germany, also was split into four zones of occupation. The Soviet area became East Berlin, while the other three sectors were known collectively as West Berlin.

Through the 1950s, the Cold War simmered and millions of East Germans fled to West Berlin. By 1961, 20 percent of the East German population had left the country.

In April 1961, after only a few months in office, President John F. Kennedy authorized the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. A complete failure, the CIA-led operation signaled to the Soviets the new president's potential weakness.

On June 4, 1961, during summit talks in Vienna, Austria, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev informed Kennedy that, by year's end, the Soviet Union would sign a separate treaty with East Germany and prohibit access to Berlin by U.S., British and French forces.

In a July 25, 1961 address to the nation, Kennedy expressed his willingness to talk to the Soviets about the issue of Berlin. The United States, he said, "will seek peace, but will not surrender."

He asked Congress for an additional \$3.25 billion to raise six new divisions for the Army and two for the Marine Corps. Kennedy sought an increase in the active-component Army from 875,000 to 1 million troops, along with large increases to the Air Force and Navy. He planned, too, to call up the National Guard and Reserves.

On Aug. 13, 1961, the East Germans began building the wall around West Berlin to stop the outward flow of East Germans. By October, U.S. and Soviet tanks stared at each other 100 yards apart from their respective sides of the city. The Soviets ended up blinking first in what would be the high point of the confrontation, but the wall would remain until 1989.

"There were just a lot of unknowns, it was a very scary time and we had no idea where we might wind up or what might happen or if there was going to be a nuclear war," said 2nd Lt. Ray Boland of Marshfield's Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 121st Field Artillery.

At the time, the Army National Guard maintained a force of 27 divisions, of which seven were considered “high priority” units, including two armored divisions and five infantry divisions — one of which was Wisconsin’s 32nd “Red Arrow” Infantry Division.

On Sept. 6, 1961, the Pentagon ordered 148,000 Guardsmen, Reservists and Ready Reservists to undertake “combat readiness” training, which consisted of additional drill periods.

Shortly before, Congress had granted Kennedy authorization to call up 250,000 Guardsmen and Reservists without an emergency declaration. Although not a formal alert, the order essentially was a warning of a possible call to active duty.

Such call-ups would allow the Pentagon to deploy up to six stateside active-duty divisions to Europe with the mobilized Guard and Reserve backfilling their positions in the United States. Eventually, the 32nd and the Texas National Guard’s 49th Armored Division were activated and their troops told to report to their armories Oct. 15 for up to one year of stateside training.

In the summer of 1961, the 32nd was within 100 men of its authorized strength of 10,200. During its annual training, the division earned 13 staff level and 24 company-level superior unit awards, with many other elements rated as excellent.

“Our training the summer before had [unit ratings] of mostly excellents and superiors,” 32nd Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. Herbert Smith said in a 1986 interview with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

Smith had enlisted in the Army in 1919 as a private and joined the Wisconsin

National Guard in 1921. He mobilized with the division in 1940 and in World War II commanded the division's 2nd Battalion, 128th Infantry during its battles in New Guinea and the Philippines.

Smith was not the only highly experienced Soldier in the division. The Red Arrow in 1961 also included more than 80 other Soldiers who mobilized with the division in 1940, many of whom were now senior commissioned and noncommissioned officers.

Although the 32nd Infantry Division knew that a call-up was possible, it was not until Sept. 19 that its Soldiers, including their commander, received official notification that the division would mobilize.

"I got it over the radio first that were going to be called up," Smith said. "I was at work as superintendent of mails in the post office at Oshkosh; I got the news through the media, rather than from Washington."

The radio message did not surprise Pfc. Clark Babl, whose platoon leader had received some information earlier that summer while attending Armor Officer School in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

"He said we better buy our Christmas presents early," Babl said in a 1992 interview with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

After about a week at home armories, an advance party flew to Fort Lewis to prepare for the division's arrival. They cleaned barracks that had been mothballed since World War II and, in between half-mile hikes to the nearest mess hall, cut the cantonment area's knee-high grass.

The rest of the division received a final weekend furlough to spend with families. Many celebrated an early Thanksgiving. In scenes reminiscent of those 21 years earlier, thousands tearfully watched their community's soldiers board one of 17 troop trains that would carry most of the 10,000 Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers into service to the nation for the third time in 44 years.

Two thousand more journeyed via automobile across the Rocky Mountains in an era before interstate highways, and 1,500 experienced their first airplane rides on a chartered commercial carrier.

All arrived safely despite the fact that one car with two Soldiers fell nearly 4,000 feet in the mountains, and a troop train hit a gravel truck in Montana, killing six civilians. Maj. Gen. Smith and his wife Evelyn visited the rail accident site shortly after it happened.

"Mrs. Smith and I were on our way out in my car," Smith said. "We had stopped in Montana overnight in a motel and I turned the radio on to get the morning news, and I heard this troop train had been wrecked near Miles City."

Although no Guardsmen were hurt, Evelyn Smith talked to all the troops and urged them to contact their families who undoubtedly had heard news reports of the train accident.

"Now let your parents and families know that you're all right — your families won't know unless they hear it directly from you," Evelyn Smith said.

Once at Fort Lewis, the men of the 32nd engaged in the time-honored troop ritual of complaining. Conditions were cramped as Army Reservists trickled in to fill out the division's strength to near 14,000.

"It was about 4,000, and a number of them had just come off of active duty tours with other units and gone into reserve pool [to complete their military service obligation]," Smith said.

With classrooms pressed into barracks, training shifted outdoors during the area's notorious rainy season. Most of these buildings had not been used since the war and possessed few amenities. Hot water and furnaces were notably missing. Supplies and equipment were slow to arrive, and there was much idle time as the division was brought up to strength and adjusted to active duty. These conditions nurtured questions among many Soldiers as to their purpose at Fort Lewis. Some Soldiers made their thoughts known to their state's congressional delegation.

Rep. Alvin O'Konski received 16 separate complaints and, after a three-day tour of the base, called for an investigation by the House Armed Services Committee. Sen. William Proxmire conducted a surprise visit to Fort Lewis and spent considerable time interviewing enlisted Soldiers about living conditions, training and their general thoughts on the mobilization.

Ultimately, Proxmire explained that many of the division's supply problems stemmed from the different supply systems of the Guard and the active component, but the Army's filler policy of mobilizing individual Reservists to bring the unit up to full strength also concerned him.

Another interested member of the Wisconsin congressional delegation was Rep. Melvin R. Laird, who would introduce the Total Force Policy in 1970 as President Richard Nixon's Secretary of Defense. He, too, visited the 32nd at Fort Lewis.

After some bad press, the men of the 32nd did not want to give the impression that they were whining. Pvt. Laurence Matzat clarified to the Milwaukee Journal about the deployment: "It's a Soldier's prerogative to gripe, but there is a difference between griping and crying."

Other issues sorted themselves out as the training tempo increased and Soldiers were allowed to live off post if their families followed them from Wisconsin.

Kennedy addressed the need for the activation when he said, "We called them in to prevent a war, not to fight a war."

The mobilization placed a significant strain on Soldiers' families and their communities. The small northern Wisconsin town of Rib Lake petitioned the governor for a physician after its sole doctor mobilized. Other communities shared similar stories.

Privates who earned little more than \$100 a month wondered how they could pay their mortgages and support their families. Soldiers with small businesses pondered what condition their businesses would be in when they returned.

"I had a \$100 car payment and made \$118 a month," Babl said. "Consequently, I supplemented my income by giving haircuts, 50 cents a clip, and using my car as a taxicab while at Fort Lewis."

The mobilization even affected the Green Bay Packers, which had three players in the Army Reserve.

Shortly after star halfback Paul Hornung deployed with an engineer unit to Fort Riley, Kansas, linebacker Ray Nitschke and flanker Boyd Dowler received word that they were going to Fort Lewis with the 32nd.

The Packers and the Army eventually agreed to furlough Nitschke and Dowler on weekends so they could play in games. However, the Packers had to provide a game film that the two gridiron Soldiers would show to troops during evening recreational events.

“It was one of the most beneficial periods for the morale of the men there,” said Brig. Gen. Francis Schweinler, commander of the 32nd Division Artillery. “Here were two well-known men, players — active players — doing this job and answering questions in a man-to-man way. It was just tremendous.”

At least nine other professional athletes who were members of the Reserve served with the division, including Elgin Baylor of the Los Angeles Lakers, as well as players from the New York Yankees, Milwaukee Braves, Minnesota Vikings and Detroit Lions.

Training began in earnest in November and into December. Soldiers spent hours on ranges honing their skills with individual and crew-served weapons before moving on to more advanced training with a large-unit focus.

The 32nd had not maneuvered as a division since World War II. Drills and annual training had concentrated only on creating proficient squads, platoons and companies. The complexity of exercises increased with a combined arms focus, as well as in joint maneuvers with the regular Army’s 4th Infantry Division.

“I think one of the things I remember about the training was the diversification of the terrain in which we trained,” Babl remarked. “The camouflage techniques, the travel and the movement was very different then we were used to at Fort McCoy and drove home that you, your equipment and your unit had to operate in these different conditions.”

The 32nd’s hard training paid off when on Feb. 15, 1962 it was made part of the Strategic Army Corps (STRAC), which meant the division was ready for a joint Air and Army deployment to nearly anywhere in the world. For the division’s remaining time at Fort Lewis, the 32nd maintained a 300-man force on standby and ready to move in two hours.

As a STRAC unit, the 32nd for the next several months honed its edge by engaging in some of the military’s largest and innovative training events of the era.

About a quarter of the division trekked to California’s Fort Irwin in March 1962 for desert training at Exercise Bristle Cone, which was a joint Army and Air exercise that concentrated on unit movement and tactical air operations.

Led by Oshkosh-based 2nd Battle Group, 127th Infantry, the exercise exposed the division to the rigors of fighting in a desert environment where it defeated the aggressor force from the regular Army’s 1st Infantry Division.

“I rated the division about three or four out of ten on the training scale before Bristle Cone,” said Smith. “We came out of that between a seven or maybe a nine.”

In May, the division was the feature unit in a massive exercise at Washington’s Yakima Firing Center. Dubbed Exercise Mesa Drive, the 32nd joined with regular

Army elements and Air Force assets — a total of 26,000 personnel.

It was the Army's largest military exercise since World War II, and it simulated a combined conventional and nuclear battlefield in terrain that ranged from mountains and high desert to thick forests filled with steep ravines.

"We maneuvered against the 4th Infantry Division in Yakima and we did pretty well holding our own," Smith said.

A 32nd Infantry Division news release summed up the exercise's culminating battle: "Attacking after a barrage of Red Arrow mock nuclear and conventional fire power, two 32nd Division battle groups pushed a 6,000-man aggressor force out of its last stronghold at the Yakima Firing Center in Central Washington. Riflemen cut a wide hole in the left defensive flank and an armored team from Antigo bulled through."

Meanwhile, the Eau Claire-based 1st Battle Group, 128th Infantry, was the Army's first unit to undergo counter guerilla training, culminating with a June 1962 exercise against Special Forces units.

Dubbed Exercise Sherwood Forest, the training took place in the rainforest and mountains of Washington's Olympic peninsula.

"The training was developed to allow the battle group to function in any climate, under any condition in any locale in the world," said Lt. Col. Harold Alwin, the battle group's executive officer.

Preceding the exercise, troops conducted mountain training on snowy Mt. Rainer and became adept with explosives, hand-to-hand combat, as well as scaling obstacles and swift streams. Proud of this grueling training, the 128th adopted a distinctive beret created by removing the bill from their patrol cap.

While the 32nd trained, tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union had calmed. Planning for the unit's return to Wisconsin soon dominated leadership's time. Meanwhile, the division's training schedule lightened considerably and troops were able to take leave and enjoy the Pacific Northwest.

"Attending the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle sticks out in my mind," Babl said. "I probably would never have had an opportunity like that."

The 32nd Infantry Division commence its journey to Wisconsin on Aug. 1. The entire division received travel pay and returned home by personal vehicle. The division completed its mission on Aug. 10 and troops returned to their normal drill schedules by September.

The 32nd's deployment presented many lessons learned and made a lasting impact on national defense policy, and how the Army would eventually integrate the National Guard as a strategic and operational reserve.

At the unit level, one-weekend a month drills soon replaced weekly evening drills, and its World War II era equipment was replaced. The Army also initiated a realignment of a number of National Guard divisions into smaller brigades that would integrate better with regular Army forces. The 32nd Infantry Division realigned as a brigade in 1967 — it continues to serve today as the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

At the national level, Wisconsin's Melvin Laird applied some lessons from his visits to Fort Lewis after he became President Nixon's secretary of defense. His Total Force Policy set the conditions for the nation's post-Vietnam War force, and integrated the National Guard as the primary combat reserve of the United States Army and Air Force.

Although they never deployed overseas, Red Arrow troops knew that they completed a significant mission.

"Many episodes will be remembered as nightmares, but there will also be ties of friendship which will last longer than bad memories," the division's deployment yearbook stated. "The 32nd was called to do a job, we feel that we have now completed that job."

President Kennedy remarked on the division's achievements.

"From the time when it was first alerted for duty in September 1961, the Red Arrow Division has achieved an exemplary record — one in which you may take great pride. In attaining the high state of combat effectiveness, the Division has lived up to its excellent reputation and, in so doing, has added materially to the readiness of our forces ... When the free world needed increased military strength to meet its challenges, you responded. Having met the emergency and accomplished your mission, you can return to your civilian pursuits with pride in your hearts."