

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard troops help ensure safety and security in Washington D.C. during presidential inauguration

Posted on Wednesday, Jan 20, 2021

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More than 550 Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard were on hand at the 59th presidential inauguration in Washington D.C. today after mobilizing over the weekend to assist with safety and security efforts at the inauguration.

Wisconsin troops joined more than 25,000 other National Guard troops from every other state and territory in supporting the mission.

The Citizen Soldiers began mobilizing Jan. 15 in response to a request for assistance to the National Guard at the federal level, and they boarded KC-135s from the Wisconsin Air National Guard's Milwaukee-based 128th Air Refueling Wing on several flights early Jan. 16. Additional troops departed the state from Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin over the remainder of the weekend before arriving in Washington ahead of the inauguration.

Wisconsin Army National Guard units – sourced from the 32nd “Red Arrow” Infantry Brigade Combat Team, joined Airmen from the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 128th Air Refueling and the 115th Fighter Wing in providing security in the area surrounding the U.S. Capitol, and many reflected on the significance of their mission.

The last time Wisconsin troops served in the national capital region besides for ceremonial purposes dates all the way back to the 1800s and the Civil War.

Capt. Josh Ligocki, who is responsible for personnel and administration for the Wisconsin task force has mobilized for overseas deployments several times over the course of his career and returned from his most recent deployment to Ukraine in August 2020. He noted the many contributions the Wisconsin National Guard has made to its communities, state, and nation over the past year.

“It just shows that our level of preparedness is probably the best it’s ever been, and our ability to identify and respond and coordinate is just getting better,” Ligocki said. “And it is a bit of pressure. I’ve been back from my last overseas mobilization since August and working for the 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, and we’re already working on our fifth mobilization outside of COVID and the polling responses, so it’s just an enormous year that we’ve had, and this next year doesn’t seem to be slowing down.”

“I think there a lot of people that are just excited to see what this looks like and defend and support the Constitution as they rose their hand to do a long time ago or just recently,” he added.

Many of the Wisconsin troops have been part of the various other missions the Wisconsin National Guard has supported in the past 12 months, ranging from the pandemic response, to civil unrest in Wisconsin, and serving as poll workers in the state’s elections.

One such Soldier was Spc. Jared Zink, assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry. In the past year he spent several months mobilized in support of the state’s COVID-19 pandemic response and also mobilized to assist civil authorities during civil unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin in August.

“I think it means that the Wisconsin National Guard is one of the best ones,” Zink, an Appleton, Wisconsin resident, said. “We’re always ready. We’re always prepared, and we can tackle any challenge that comes our way.

Zink said he was looking forward to returning to the nation’s capital. His only other time visiting was when he and his family buried his great grandfather, a World War II veteran, at Arlington National Cemetery 10 years ago.

Spc. Christian Zeitler, a medic assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry’s headquarters, had never been to Washington D.C. before, and the mobilization marked his first-ever mobilization in the National Guard, but he was looking forward

to the opportunity to serve.

“I’m a medic, so I’m hoping to just keep people safe and hopefully nothing happens,” he said. “So hopefully I don’t have to do anything, but if I have to, hopefully I can help get people home safe.”

Spc. Shane Kieslich, a Union Grove, Wisconsin native, said he hadn’t been to Washington since he was there as a seventh grader. An infantryman assigned to Company A, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, Kieslich deployed to Afghanistan with the unit in 2019. He is now enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh where he studies international business.

“I think it says that we’re pretty versatile,” he said of the Wisconsin National Guard’s ability to take on so many diverse missions. “We can do so many things. We’ve done the protests. We’ve gone overseas to Afghanistan, and now we get called up for this. I think it says that we can do our jobs well in a professional manner and they trust us to do that job.”

Other Citizen Soldiers looked forward to helping with the security mission as well.

“This is why I joined,” said 2nd Lt. Mason Higgins, a platoon leader in Company C, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry. “This is a really important mission. I’m serving my country and my state in this mission. I’m going to go and interact with Soldiers across the states and territories in the nation’s capital. We watched it being ransacked two weeks ago, and that was heartbreaking to me personally.”

“I’ll get to watch it in a few days here – the transfer of power peacefully in another example of our democracy being strong and enduring,” he said. “That’s very important to me.”

Like most others in the Wisconsin National Guard, Higgins, who is currently a law student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has mobilized several times in the past year.

“It’s been very busy for sure,” Higgins said. “I think the ‘Always Ready’ thing is very real. It really has been a hard year for all of us beyond just COVID, also being gone from home, gone from school, gone from work over and over and over again, but I also think that chance to keep learning and growing as Soldiers is really important to us.”

Another member of the task force, 1st Lt. Rodrick Watson, left his job as an associate principal at Shawano Middle School in Shawano, Wisconsin, to support this mission. He has deployed to Iraq during his career, and also as part of the COVID-19 response and as a poll worker during elections in the past year. He shared his perspective on the importance of Citizen Soldiers and Airmen serving in this capacity.

“I think that’s what makes this mission unique, because Washington D.C. kind of represents citizenship,” Watson, a former history teacher, said. “It’s the people’s house that got ransacked last week, and we’ve got Citizen Soldiers coming to defend the people’s house this week in case anyone tries that again.”

He’s been to Washington D.C. many times over the course of his life leading student tour groups as a teacher and school administrator including in 2001 when he saw the Pentagon still smoldering after the attacks of 9/11.

“You can only have a democracy if you choose to keep it,” he said. “So you have to have an informed citizenry and peaceful transfer of power, and you have to respect people’s rights along the way. So the National Guard represents all those things, and the peaceful transfer of power is not something that is easy or automatic or that most countries even get right. But we have to. So that peaceful transfer of power, we’ve been able to do that for 59 inaugurations, and we intend to do it again this time.”

The Soldiers and Airmen from Wisconsin will be on hand in Washington D.C. as long as civil authorities there request their assistance in support of the inauguration.