

National Guard: Wisconsin Guard medevac unit answering the call on overseas deployment

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The officer in charge of approximately 35 Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers currently performing medevac missions across the Middle East in support of Operations Inherent Resolve and Spartan Shield reports that the deployment is going well.

“We have a disclaimer phrase — deployment experiences may vary,” said Capt. Robert Holt of Detachment 1, Company G, 2nd Battalion, 104th Aviation, which left Wisconsin last June. “Medevac is a pretty unique mission set, where most of the time we find ways to keep ourselves occupied. Overall, we haven’t been super busy, which is a bit of a Catch-22.”

Holt said the medevac mission is more than transporting sick or injured troops — crews have resupplied blood, oxygen, medication, and other critical medical equipment in a deployed setting.

Still, the relatively quiet deployment has allowed plenty of time for training on individual and collective tasks, as well as training events with various U.S. ground forces and coalition partner forces.

“During these training events, we showcase our capabilities while completing familiarization training in loading and unloading a litter onto a Black Hawk helicopter,” Holt said. “Recently, we also conducted a realistic critical patient transfer scenario with a coalition partner force surgical team, which resulted in the surgical team revising a few of their practices and procedures to better suit real scenarios.”

The 2nd Battalion, 104th Aviation Regiment is a Pennsylvania Army National Guard unit, with subordinate units in other states, including the detachment for Company G in West Bend, Wisconsin. It is not uncommon for Army National Guard aviation units to be dispersed across large geographic areas, as this helps distribute helicopter assets across states. But this also meant that Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers were parceled across three sites in three different countries and two time zones for this deployment.

“Our air crews are intermixed with an identical detachment from Nebraska,” Holt explained. “Our maintenance and refueling Soldiers were also absorbed into our battalion’s D and E companies, and have been split up across multiple locations as well. Keeping track of where all our Soldiers are as they rotate between locations has been one of the most difficult tasks.”

Still, morale is good, Holt said.

“Each location has found ways to come together as a small family,” he said.

Being away from home for several months is difficult, Spc. Mikaela Bolker acknowledged, “but FaceTime, letters, social media and phone calls have helped.”

With reduced demand for medevac missions, Bolker has kept busy with graduate school, fitness and personal projects. She also brought her violin and uploaded videos of her playing the violin in a hangar.

“My video went viral on Twitter,” she exclaimed, noting that her video of the fiddle tune “Devil’s Dream” was retweeted by Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Grinston, the U.S. Army’s senior enlisted leader, as well as Gen. Paul Funk, commanding general of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), and displayed on other military social media platforms.

Spc. Jessica de la Torre compared the deployment to a learning sabbatical.

“Being so new in the Guard, I came with so much room to exercise what I learned in [advanced individual training] as a signalier and learn the ins and outs of flight operations in a medevac unit,” de la Torre said. “I have had the opportunity to learn what options there are in one-off medevac situations, trouble-shoot radios, establish communications when they’ve been lost, and so much more. I want to continue to gather as much information as I can. If I’m ever in a tough situation, I want to have

the background and experience to have a sense of direction for how to solve it.”

Approximately 40 percent of the Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers on this mission had prior deployment experience, which has proven beneficial.

“One of the biggest assets we’ve had was the level of crew experience we brought,” Holt said. “When we left for deployment, our aircrew members had the highest average of flight hours of any company in our brigade.”

The Wisconsin troops include pilots, mechanics, crew chiefs, aircraft maintainers, supply specialists, aviation refuelers, signal support specialists, and flight operations.

As the deployment winds down, Holt said time seemed to be speeding up.

“We are all looking forward to being home with our families soon, and hope that everyone back home is staying happy and healthy,” he said.

The Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers are expected to return to Wisconsin later this spring.