

Wisconsin National Guard: 2021 Year-in-Review: another historic year for the Wisconsin National Guard

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2021 will go down as one of the most historic years in Wisconsin National Guard history.

After a 2020 dubbed the “Year of the Guard” both in Wisconsin and nationally due to the Guard’s unprecedented COVID-19 response, support to state elections, and repeated mobilizations for civil unrest, 2021 represented an encore performance that will go down as one of the most momentous in the long and storied 184-year history of the Wisconsin National Guard.

The Wisconsin National Guard’s COVID-19 response continued in a sustained fashion. Mobilized since March 12, 2020, hundreds of troops remained mobilized throughout 2021 to support the state’s response to the ongoing pandemic. And while 2020 saw the Guard take on a variety of pandemic-related missions ranging from testing, staffing isolation facilities, handling personal protective equipment warehousing operations, and helping to setup an alternate care facility to assisting medical examiners, staffing a state call center, and even bringing a group of cruise ship passengers home after exposure to COVID-19.

In 2021 – the Guard’s COVID response focused almost exclusively on COVID-19 testing and distributing newly released vaccines. By the end of year, the Guard had administered 1.2 million COVID tests to state residents since the beginning of the pandemic. In January 2021, the Guard began establishing mobile vaccination teams to assist communities in running public vaccination clinics. It also dispatched teams to assist the state in managing and distributing the stockpile of vaccines coming into the state. Those teams helped distribute more than 1.2 million vaccines across

Wisconsin and helped directly administer more than 230,000 vaccines to state residents at clinics.

By fall 2021, staffing shortages in state healthcare facilities continued to grow, and Wisconsin National Guard troops began training as temporary nursing assistants to help perform basic functions at four state mental health facilities. Those troops also began training as certified nursing assistants to offer higher levels of care moving forward.

The Wisconsin National Guard's mobilization for the pandemic represents the longest and largest sustained domestic mobilization in Wisconsin National Guard history. Wisconsin troops have mobilized for longer periods during both world wars, the Civil War, Spanish American War and the Global War on Terror, but never have so many troops been mobilized for so long here in Wisconsin.

As the COVID mission continued, other requirements kept up an unprecedented operations tempo. As the year began, approximately 500 troops were on duty in Kenosha to help preserve public safety as the community awaited a charging decision in the officer-involved shooting of Jacob Blake that occurred in August 2020.

Days later on Jan. 6, violence erupted at the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., and a nationwide task force of National Guard troops from all 54 states and territories assembled in the National Capital Region to secure the presidential inauguration. More than 500 Wisconsin National Guard troops - mostly from the 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the 115th Fighter Wing, and the 128th Air Refueling Wing had a front row seat for the inauguration and helped ensure a safe and peaceful transfer of power.

Simultaneously, threats to state capitol buildings nationwide emerged as well, and hundreds of troops from the Wisconsin National Guard Reaction Force deployed to Madison to assist Capitol Police in securing the statehouse.

In the months that followed the inauguration in Washington D.C., tensions remained high and the National Guard provided an enduring security presence around the capitol building. The Wisconsin National Guard's 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Brigade Combat Team once again sent a task force of approximately 130 troops to Washington to augment security efforts there from March to May.

Meanwhile, overseas deployments in support of the Wisconsin National Guard's federal mission continued. The Waukesha, Wisconsin-based 135th Medical Company and approximately 60 Soldiers received mobilization orders and deployed to Kuwait and Iraq at the end of March, where the troops continue to provide medical care to U.S. and coalition troops operating in the region. Approximately 35 troops from the West Bend, Wisconsin-based Detachment 1, Company G, 2nd Battalion, 104th Aviation returned in the spring from a Middle East deployment in support of Operations Inherent Resolve and Spartan Shield.

In May, the 107th Maintenance Company, based in Sparta and Viroqua, Wisconsin, mobilized for deployment to Eastern Europe. The unit's 150 Soldiers remain split between Romania and Poland, where they provided maintenance support for the Defender Europe 2021 exercise and U.S. troops supporting Operation Atlantic Resolve.

The Wisconsin Army National Guard's 176th Cyber Protection Team also completed its first federal mission after a nearly 14-month mobilization to Fort Meade, Maryland in support of U.S. Cyber Command. The unit's personnel returned to Wisconsin in December.

Meanwhile, the 229th Engineer Company, based in Platteville and Richland Center, Wisconsin, got orders to deploy to the Southwest Border in the fall.

Dozens of Airmen from Milwaukee's 128th Air Refueling Wing continued worldwide deployments throughout the year. In October, hundreds of Airmen from the Madison, Wisconsin-based 115th Fighter Wing deployed to Saudi Arabia where it joined the 378th Air Expeditionary Wing to provide agile combat air support for the U.S. Central Command area of operations throughout the Middle East. The unit's overseas deployment represents its last as an F-16 unit, as the unit prepares to convert to the F-35 in the next year.

Back in Madison, preparations to receive the F-35 continued, as the base broke ground on a new \$9 million F-35 simulator over the summer. The unit expects to award nearly \$100 million worth of construction projects at the base as part of the conversion to the new airframe.

Other mission highlights from 2021 included when nearly 200 Guard members mobilized during the Milwaukee Bucks NBA Finals run in July. Those troops helped provide COVID-testing, vaccines, security, and traffic control during the celebration

of the Bucks NBA Finals victory. The Wisconsin Air National Guard also provided an F-16 flyover of the “Deer District” in Milwaukee before the championship-sealing victory.

In September and October, nearly 25 Soldiers deployed to California and Washington to battle wildfires and provide search and rescue support. The troops accumulated approximately 100 flight hours and dropped more than 130,000 gallons of water on fires.

Events on the other side of the world also had major implications in Wisconsin as summer turned to fall. As the war in Afghanistan came to an end and the last American troops departed the nation after 20 years of war, thousands of Afghan evacuees also began arriving in the United States. Thousands arrived in Wisconsin by way of Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin, en route to nearby Fort McCoy. Airfield managers, refuelers, and security forces personnel worked around the clock at Volk Field to keep the airfield running as more than 100 flights arrived at Volk Field. All told, military personnel from 28 different states led by a dual-status commander – the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s Brig. Gen. Joane Mathews – helped receive thousands of arriving evacuees.

In November, more than 500 Red Arrow troops comprising the National Guard Reaction Force mobilized again to support Kenosha, if needed, during the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. The troops staged in the region ready to respond to Kenosha, if needed as the trial’s conclusion loomed.

Even with so many domestic and overseas missions in 2021, regular Wisconsin National Guard training continued in earnest. Units in both the Army and Air National Guard engaged in demanding exercises and training events.

Among the highlights were the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade and the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team participating in a Warfighter Exercise at Fort Riley, Kansas. The multi-component exercise involving active duty and reserve component units from both the U.S. and Europe involved a high-intensity computer simulation, and tested the ability of the headquarters at each echelon to produce actionable orders, monitor execution, and react based on enemy locations. The Red Arrow’s 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry, which celebrated its centennial in 2021, also conducted a Spur Ride during its annual training where it’s troopers had the opportunity to earn their coveted spurs after passing a series of rigorous tests and physical requirements.

Engineer units from the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade like the 229th Engineer Company completed a variety of innovative training such as helping to build Camp Kamassa – a 362-acre camp for children and adults with special needs in Mississippi. Meanwhile, the 950th Engineer Company, based in Superior and Spooner, helped make improvements at a tactical training base at Fort McCoy.

The 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery unit became the first American high-mobility rocket artillery system (HIMARS) to launch rockets in Sweden, as part of a special operations training event to demonstrate the U.S.'s ability to rapidly deploy HIMARS in the Baltic Sea area. Fourteen Soldiers from the unit participated alongside Special Operations Command Europe and the Swedish Air Force in exercises Voldemort 22 and Adamant Serpent 22. A Swedish C-130 Hercules and a U.S. Air Force MC-130J Commando II flew out to Gotland, a remote Swedish island in the Baltic Sea and landed on a paved highway. The HIMARS launcher disembarked from the MC-130J for a few minutes, then was loaded on the aircraft again and flown to northern Sweden for a live-fire exercise.

Units in the 64th Troop Command also had a variety of unique training opportunities. The 1157th Transportation Company, based in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, also conducted a demanding and rigorous training rotation to the Joint Regional Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana during its annual training period over the summer. The 457th Chemical Company, a key unit in the early days of the state's COVID-19 pandemic response, traveled to Camp Roberts, California, to train on its core mission of supporting Army operations in contaminated environments. The 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation traveled to Canada to participate in the annual Maple Resolve exercise.

Air Guard units likewise had busy training rotations throughout the year, including the Northern Thaw exercise held at Volk Field in the spring. None were bigger than the annual Northern Lightning Exercise at Volk Field, which brought nearly 1,000 personnel and 60 aircraft from the National Guard, Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy to Volk Field for one of the premier exercises in the nation.

With so many major missions, exercises, and events in 2021, it's no wonder units and troops in the organization continued to bring home the hardware in terms of awards and recognitions. The 115th Fighter Wing received its 11th Air Force Outstanding Unit Award this year, and the Army National Guard's 426th Regional Training Institute at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin received the Superior Unit Award in February.

Other honors included 1st Lt. Nathaniel Hitchcock and Sgt. Levi Parker competing in the annual Best Sapper Competition in Missouri – a 50-hour gauntlet for combat engineers. Parker also received the prestigious Maj. Richard I. Bong Award from the Milwaukee Armed Services Committee for displaying outstanding traits of leadership and professionalism through his service to the military and community. Spc. Timothy Hicks from the 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion emerged from the annual Wisconsin Best Warrior Competition as the Soldier of the Year, while Sgt. Savannah Lipinski from the Recruiting and Retention Battalion became the Noncommissioned Officer of the Year.

Sgt. 1st Class John Battista, also a member of the Recruiting and Retention Battalion received the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal for his service to his church, community, and the military, while Capt. Alicia Dorsett, of the 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery received the 1st Lt. Thomas E. Wortham IV Award, given annually to a Wisconsin National Guard member who displays exceptional service to the military and their community. In August, Dorsett became the first female field artillery commander in Wisconsin National Guard history.

Other leaders also moved on to new commands in 2021. Col. Eric Leckel took command of the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade from Col. Matthew Beilfuss, who led the brigade for the last two-plus years. Two other senior Wisconsin Army National Guard leaders earned promotions to the rank of brigadier general – Brig. Gen. Timothy Covington, who took over as the deputy adjutant general for civil support, and Brig. Gen. Daniel Pulvermacher, who took a new position at National Guard Bureau.

With such a high operations tempo and busy training regimen, support from families and employers is of paramount importance. Thankfully, the Wisconsin National Guard continued to enjoy both in 2021. In fact, Wisconsin became the first state to sweep the major awards for the annual Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve's (ESGR) Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Awards. For the first time in its 25-year history, one state won the awards for large and small private companies and a public agency for supporting the Guard and Reserve employees.

The year also brought a renewed focus on service member wellness. The innovative Wisconsin National Guard Comprehensive Health and Wellness Course – which focuses on teaching service members five pillars of wellness including physical, mental, spiritual, social, and financial – began gaining national attention in 2021, and the course continues to grow in Wisconsin. In July, the Comprehensive Health

and Wellness Leaders Course took their show on the road out-of-state for the first time. The program brought its course to National Guard Bureau as a demonstration of how effective it can be in helping leaders relate better to their troops and how to establish meaningful and sustainable wellness for troops.

The year proved to be one of the most historic in the long lineage of the Wisconsin National Guard, but the Guard looks forward to an even brighter year in 2022.