

Wisconsin National Guard: Red Fox Battalion brings the heat at winter strike exercise in Michigan

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CAMP GRAYLING MANEUVER TRAINING CENTER, Mich. — Elements of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery – the Red Fox Battalion – braved frigid conditions as part of the second annual Northern Strike exercise's winter iteration exercise, known as Winter Strike.

After attending Northern Strike 20-2 last year, the 120th Field Artillery – part of the Wisconsin National Guard's famed 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Brigade Combat Team, wanted more cold-weather, joint fires training this year at Northern Strike 21-1, and they spent the last 10 days of January delivering precision fire support as part of the exercise.

The Wisconsin troops were among Army National Guard, Air National Guard and Marine Corps Reserve units from a half-dozen states to participate in Winter Strike. The exercise, which capitalizes on the Michigan National Guard's premier facilities at Camp Grayling and the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, serves as a venue for U.S. and coalition forces to receive advanced training in all weather conditions. Together, the Michigan training facilities' combined ranges and air spaces comprise the National All-Domain Warfighting Center, which was established in 2020 to further capitalize on Michigan's diverse training facilities and opportunities.

For the duration of their training, the Soldiers ate, slept and worked in the field at the Camp Grayling Maneuver Training Center. They overcame wind, snow, and single digit temperatures, which are common conditions at northern Michigan's National All-Domain Warfighting Center in January.

"We typically don't shoot in the winter, so Winter Strike gives us a better understanding of how to operate in the winter environment" said Staff Sgt. Graham McFarland, a 120th section chief. "Learning how to operate in a cold weather environment includes living, dressing, and working with our equipment in the cold."

Despite the conditions, the artillery unit's mission is still the same – deliver fire support from their M119 and M777 howitzers.

"The forward observers pick a target and they send that back to our fire direction center (FDC)," said McFarland. "The FDC does the calculations and sends it to the gunline. We take the round, load it up and send it down range."

The joint environment the Northern Strike exercise series has become known for offers National Guard units the ability to enhance interoperability and better integrate their battlefield capabilities. This year the Soldiers were able to work with Marines and Airmen to integrate fire with air assets like A-10 Thunderbolts II and B-52 Stratofortresses.

"Being able to come here and do this type of training helps our Soldiers see the bigger picture," said Capt. Alexander Fhlug, the commander of A Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery. "Working with joint partners makes the training dynamic, more complex and complicated. When we get to synchronize our artillery fires with fire from the air it makes us a more lethal force."

The benefits don't just stop at the units who attend Winter Strike. Northern Strike exercises ensure our nation's National Guard and Reserve forces are ready to meet the challenges outlined in the National Defense Strategy.

"Understanding capabilities and limitations increases our interoperability," said Fhlug. "When we know how Marines, special forces, or our air partners fight we are able to increase our readiness and provide combat power to enable success."

While it is only their second year participating in Winter Strike, the Red Fox Battalion sees it as a valuable part of their training.

"[Winter Strike] is a local opportunity to do something outside the norm," said Fhlug. "We are able to stress our systems in the winter time. This allows us to see how we can be more effective in austere environments that can't be matched anywhere else."

The thrill of firing howitzers is certainly a motivating factor for many of the Soldiers, no matter the conditions.

“The big boom – it gets your heart pumping,” said Specialist Sharrod Harper, a member of C Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery, a unit based in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.

Sgt. Gabriel Morris of Pewaukee, Wisc., has participated in several training evolutions at Camp Grayling in both the summer months, for the larger Northern Strike exercise, as well at 2020’s inaugural Winter Strike.

“One thing about Winter Strike – there’s no sunburn,” Morris said.

A bricklayer in his civilian capacity, Morris said Winter Strike gives his team an opportunity to train in a different environment.

“I think having to train under different sets of conditions makes us a better team,” he said of his fellow soldiers in the battery.

For Winter Strike 2021, Harper was assigned as his firing team’s ammo chief. It was his job to track what type of ammunition was called for to be fired from one of the battery’s M-777 Howitzers and then to complete the paperwork to ensure all of his team’s ammunition is accounted for after their time in the field.

“I initially joined for the education benefits and to follow in family tradition,” Harper said. “I have had family that’s served in several branches of the military. But if you are going to be in field artillery, I think you have to love it when the weapon fires. That’s the big rush.”

Like Morris, Harper, who lives in Madison, Wisconsin, is a traditional member of the Wisconsin National Guard, serving generally one weekend per month and a few weeks of training every year. In his civilian job, he works in security at a Madison hospital.

“We’ve got a great group of Soldiers in this company and training like this is what keeps them sharp and ready for the mission,” said Staff Sgt. Michael LaDue, who served as the lead of one of the gun teams for C Battery.

In addition to the Wisconsin field artillery, Winter Strike 21, training focused on synchronizing joint fires with Marine and Army rotary-wing assets, B-52 bombers

from the Air Force active-duty 5th Bomb Wing in Minot, North Dakota, and the West Virginia National Guard. Air National Guard (ANG) JTACs from New Jersey's 227th Air Support Operations Squadron (ASOS) and New York's 274th ASOS, ANG A-10Cs from Selfridge, Michigan, and Marine Corps 2nd ANGLICO (Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company) from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, also participated.

The National All-Domain Warfighting Center is home to nearly 148,000 acres of ground maneuver area and the largest overland military operating airspace east of the Mississippi River. Michigan's unique geography, airspace, ranges, and growing connection to the defense industry make it an ideal environment for All-Domain training and operations.