

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard looks back on role in Operation Allies Welcome

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The Wisconsin National Guard played an important supporting role in Operation Allies Welcome, the nearly six-month mission to resettle thousands of Afghan nationals, which ended last month at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

Operation Allies Welcome is an effort led by the Department of Homeland Security, supported by the U.S. State Department, the Department of Defense and U.S. Northern Command, to provide transportation, temporary housing and general support for Afghan evacuees at suitable facilities in the United States.

According to the Fort McCoy public affairs office, more than 12,600 Afghan nationals arrived at Fort McCoy beginning Aug. 22, 2021. The military base provided temporary housing, food, clothing, medical services, and helped process immigration benefits as part of the effort to resettle the Afghans in communities across the United States.

The Wisconsin National Guard's Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center was a key part of that process. Airfield managers, refuelers and security forces worked around the clock to receive several flights per day of evacuees heading to Fort McCoy for a total of 93 flights between August and October.

Brig. Gen. Joane Mathews, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army serving as dual-status commander, greeted arriving individuals, and Wisconsin National Guard linguists created signage in Dari and Pashto languages. Designated relief agencies used Wisconsin National Guard facilities to receive and stage supplies bound for Fort McCoy.

Additionally, Wisconsin National Guard COVID-19 teams spent 141 mission days at Fort McCoy — sometimes working 14-hour days — collecting 42,076 specimens from Afghans and administering 1,451 vaccines.

“I believe that the Wisconsin National Guard provided critical COVID mitigation support to the entire Operation Allies Welcome mission,” said Svea Erlandson, strategic plans and policy officer with the Wisconsin National Guard’s directorate of domestic operations. “Although COVID-19 was not the only epidemiological concern on site, the Wisconsin National Guard provided a reliable, consistent and professional capability in both the testing and vaccination spheres. With regard to testing, [we] showed exemplary ability to integrate with both the active duty forces and the contractors on site to develop processes and systems to perform surveillance testing of the Afghan guests. With regard to vaccination, [we] provided a unique and critical capacity to the disease mitigation on site.”

Erlandson said the Wisconsin National Guard COVID-19 teams administered COVID vaccines to Afghans independent of medical screening procedures, but also provided crucial support for multiple mass vaccination events. According to Fort McCoy public affairs, Afghans received approximately 87,000 vaccines — besides COVID-19, these included measles, mumps, rubella, varicella, polio and the flu.

“In my opinion,” Erlandson said, “being able to perform all of these functions allowed the active duty, governmental and non-governmental partners to provide the attention that these measures would have required toward other important concerns on base.”

Lt. Col. Cory Newmann spent two months at Volk Field, serving as the liaison officer for the Wisconsin National Guard Joint Staff. He also managed a team of Army and Air Force linguists who assisted with translation.

“The United States had a responsibility to help the Afghans and their families that supported our mission in Afghanistan,” Newmann said. “It was an incredible honor to help with this mission.”

Newmann said this mission was “incredibly meaningful” to him as it provided an opportunity to help those in dire need.

“I have sharp memories of evacuees arriving late at night, walking off our aircraft carrying only a few belongings in plastic bags,” Newmann said. “Some were injured,

possibly from the dangerous escape from Afghanistan. As tired as they all appeared to be, they were appreciative as we helped them off the aircraft and onto the bus to Fort McCoy. Children were holding hands and they walked barefoot into their new life in the United States.

“I will never forget it as long as I live.”

Though the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s 107th Support Maintenance Company was deployed in Europe, its armory in Sparta, Wisconsin supported Operation Allies Welcome as the main collection and distribution point for donated items for Afghan evacuees.

“Once a donation was dropped off, it was sorted into its respective category, then sent to Fort McCoy to be distributed to the guests,” said 1st Lt. Brittini Swanson, facility manager and part of the 107th Support Maintenance Company’s rear detachment staff.

The armory accepted donations from Sept. 1, 2021 through Jan. 21 of this year — seven days per week until December, then weekdays after that.

“For weeks, we were receiving multiple semi-truckloads per day, along with several community members donating truck and trailer loads of essential items,” Swanson said. “They’d finish unloading their donations and ask, ‘What else is needed?’ and show up again the next day with those critically needed items.

“It was amazing to witness our community come together to provide clothing, personal hygiene items, toys and books for the kids, and formula and bottles for infants,” Swanson continued. “I am overwhelmingly proud to be part of this community, and thankful to have had the opportunity to be involved with this mission.”

The last group of Afghan nationals left Fort McCoy Feb. 15, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

“I would like to thank the federal staff, service members, volunteers and members of the local community whose dedication was critical to the success of our mission at Fort McCoy,” said Robert Fenton, Jr., Operation Allies Welcome senior response official. “With the help of our partners across government and non-profit organizations, the 12,600 Afghan evacuees who were temporarily housed at Fort

McCoy have now joined their new communities.”

Angie Salazar, Department of Homeland Security lead for the Operation Allies Welcome mission at Fort McCoy, echoed that sentiment.

“With community donations, support from many organizations and close coordination with surrounding hospitals and public safety,” she said, “the mission accomplished the remarkable feat of resettling nearly 13,000 at-risk Afghans — including 65 newborn U.S. citizens.”