

# Wisconsin National Guard: Wisconsin Guard conducts Cold Weather Forward Observation at Michigan's "Winter Strike"

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GRAYLING, Michigan – Round after round hits the impact zone at Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center. Some of the rounds, air bursts with simulated white phosphorus, detonated seconds before impacting the frigid terrain.

Forward observers with 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery Regiment, Wisconsin National Guard, used binoculars to survey the area, observing targets such as retired tanks and other military vehicles which served as targets for field artillery guns positioned upwards of six kilometers away.

The unit could conduct this type of training at any point throughout the year; however, a winter exercise offers a unique and challenging opportunity to hone their skills under extreme conditions.

"Winter Strike" is held annually in northern Michigan during the coldest part of the year. Snow, high winds, and single digit temperatures are commonplace at Camp Grayling's National All-Domain Warfighting Center this time of year. Visiting units are able to train in subarctic conditions, so they are better able to meet the objectives laid out in the Department of Defense's arctic strategy.

U.S. Army 1st Lt. Darryl Carlson, fire support officer, Delta Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery Regiment (1-120th FA), Wisconsin National Guard said, "'Winter Strike' serves a couple different purposes for our unit. For one, the cold weather training here in Michigan is very challenging and we have experienced our share of

frigid temperatures as it dipped below 0 degrees Fahrenheit a couple nights since we arrived.”

“Secondly,” he added. “We’re here to conduct combined arms operations with the Air Force. Since arriving, we’ve partnered with Latvian joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs), U.S. Air Force National Guard JTACs, and some of the U.S. Navy JTACs. We’re working hard to integrate the air assets together with our artillery.”

JTACs direct the action of military aircraft engaged in close air support (CAS) and other air operations. They often work in conjunction with ground operations, such as field artillery units, to coordinate rounds on enemy targets.

With both artillery rounds and aircraft in the air, often at the same time, safe coordination is extremely important.

Carlson’s platoon trained at “Winter Strike” last year, their first experience at Camp Grayling. He shared that his unit’s joint fire observers (JFOs) gained valuable experience working together with Michigan and NATO-ally JTACs.

JFOs serve as an intermediary between JTACs and forward observers, who identify enemy targets on the battlefield. They take the information provided by forward observers and provide that intelligence to JTACs to help them get rounds on target.

“We are already accustomed to working together with the JTACs,” said Carlson. “But this year’s ‘Winter Strike’ has given us a lot more hands-on experience to include controlling UH-60 Blackhawks.”

Military exercises generally begin with a crawl phase where units verify that all their pieces are in place. For field artillery units, gun batteries prepare by utilizing engineers for route clearance and fortification of battle positions. Additionally, forward observers scout the terrain for the best vantage point to observe simulated enemy activity. Communication systems are tested and preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) are performed.

“Afterwards, we go through a walk phase where we basically do everything except actually firing on a target,” said Carlson. “Finally, there’s a run phase where we conduct the fire mission and our guns put rounds downrange.”

The guns in question are M777s, or howitzers, which fire a 155mm artillery round. There are several types of rounds utilized at “Winter Strike,” including illumination

rounds for low-light or night operations, simulated white phosphorus (not harmful to humans) rounds dubbed “Willie Petes,” derived from the World War II-era military phonetic alphabet, and high explosive point detonation rounds to destroy enemy vehicles, bunkers, fortifications and personnel.

At Camp Grayling, the rounds travel between four and six kilometers, depending on the firing point, to reach the impact zone where forward observers visually confirm the strike.

U.S. Army Private 1st Class Jermaine Toliver-Marx, fire support specialist on Carlson’s team with Delta Battery, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery Regiment, Wisconsin National Guard added, “I used to be out on the hill as a forward observer. Now my role is to make sure those guys stay safe.”

A fire support specialist serves as the first line of safety for forward observers watching enemy activity. After receiving coordinates from those observers, Toliver-Marx ensures artillery rounds don’t come in contact with friendly forces nor compromise their positions.

“I have four radios going at any given time,” said Toliver-Marx. “We not only talk with the forward observers, but also with higher headquarters and the batteries who are ready to fire the howitzers. We keep communications open with everyone. It gets fast-paced sometimes. But safety is always first.”

The style of communication Toliver-Marx described is considered a centralized method of fires coordination. This means the forward observers communicate what they see with their battalion support element. Carlson’s team processes the information and sends the mission to higher headquarters and the battalion fire direction center. The fire direction center relays the mission down to the individual batteries which operate the guns.

Contrast this technique with decentralized field artillery coordination which works well for quick strike, less complex missions where forward observers call for fire and batteries respond directly, immediately putting rounds on targets.

However, with air assets at their disposal, the need for a more multifaceted approach is crucial.

“At this point, we’re happy where we’re at,” said Carlson. “Along with our normal

communication, we were able to integrate our artillery with Army attack aviation and CAS. It's a big step for us, especially with these frigid temperatures."

Throughout the course of the exercise, Wisconsin National Guard leadership conducted a battlefield circulation of Camp Grayling firing points, observation posts and other multi-domain facilities. They echoed Carlson's sentiment while visiting their Soldiers in the field.

"I'm so proud of our Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers and the proficiency they demonstrated during Michigan's 'Winter Strike,'" said U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Joane Mathews, deputy adjutant general of the Wisconsin National Guard. "Training our engineers, field artillery and exercising our logistics support functions in an extreme cold weather environment will only enhance our readiness to operate in any environment."

Carlson added, "Coming out to "Winter Strike" and working with the Michigan National Guard has been great. The facilities are fantastic. Grayling Army Airfield is set up perfectly for this type of exercise. And the Michigan team has been extremely helpful which allows us to focus on training. That's the whole reason we're here."