

WI National Guard: Wisconsin Army Guard team prepares for 'history making' deployment

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Col. Eric Leckel, commander of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB), told approximately 280 deploying Soldiers as well as their families and friends about the historic nature of their upcoming mission at a formal sendoff ceremony Sept. 30 at the Miller High Life Theater in downtown Milwaukee.

"This is one of the most unique, diverse and challenging missions a unit will ever have the opportunity to partake in," Leckel said. "Each and every one of the Soldiers of the 157th MEB will be a critical piece within the only standing force on the continent of Africa."

That would be Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), an operation of the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM). The combined joint task force's mission is to promote regional security and stability, dissuade conflict, and protect United States' and coalition interests in that region.

Leckel said his troops — the 157th MEB headquarters company and the 357th Signal Company — would have the opportunity to contribute at a strategic level to the overall U.S. global security objective.

"Your work on a daily basis will make the African continent a better place," Leckel said. "You will improve the lives of countless individuals, ensuring they have the opportunity for a brighter future. Each and every one of you are a history maker and a world changer."

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 15 of this year, AFRICOM commander Gen. Stephen Townsend outlined the command's four objectives in Africa — maintain the United State's strategic access and influence on the continent; counter threats to U.S. persons, facilities and interests; prevent and respond to crises such as disaster relief or threats to embassies; and work with allies and partners to achieve shared security objectives and advance shared principles. This is largely done through focused activities such as senior leader engagements, security force assistance and cooperation, and multi-national exercises.

"Gaining and maintaining access and influence underpins all U.S. government efforts in Africa and is the cornerstone of our campaign," Townsend told the committee. "Without it, we cannot ensure U.S. ability to act, assure allies and partners, deny adversary objectives, respond to crisis, deter major war, or posture to successfully transition from deterrence to conflict."

Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, told the deploying troops they stood on the precipice of a momentous event for the Wisconsin National Guard and for U.S. African Command.

"Today marks the first time that a Wisconsin unit is deploying into the African theater on Title 10 as you are about to write a new page in Wisconsin history," Knapp said. "The world is at a critical juncture, and our adversaries are looking to expand their corrupting grasp across the globe. The 157 and 357 will play a key role in stemming these attempts by our adversaries."

According to CJTF-HOA, Russia and China have long sought to increase their influence across the African continent. Violent extremist organizations such as terrorist groups and pirates are also among U.S. adversaries in the region.

"Partnerships are, and will continue to be, the key to success in an open and orderly world," Knapp said. "Your actions abroad will have a direct effect on the security of our homeland, on the safety and prosperity of our friends, families, coworkers and neighbors."

"I have the utmost faith and confidence in you as fellow Wisconsinites and Guardsmen," Knapp continued. "Trust in your leaders as I do. Trust in your training, trust in yourselves. You do have the training, you have the character, and you have what it takes."

Gov. Tony Evers agreed.

“I am confident that you are expertly trained and ready to go to support any mission assigned to you, and that you will represent the 157th, the state of Wisconsin and our nation well,” Evers said. He expressed his gratitude for the deploying Soldiers’ service and sacrifice, noting that some among them undoubtedly supported recent state missions that include staffing polling stations, running COVID-19 testing locations and assisting in Operation Allies Welcome.

“You serve and continue to serve our state admirably and selflessly,” Evers said, “and I’m so proud to call you Citizen Soldiers for the Wisconsin National Guard.”

Evers, Knapp and unit leaders thanked family and friends for their support of the deploying Soldiers.

“Folks, this is a team and community effort,” Evers said, “from your families who sacrifice so much, to your employers and communities who are losing dedicated and talented folks like yourselves while you’re away — but we’re all behind you 100 percent in this and every mission you take.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Duane Weyer, the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade’s senior enlisted leader, spoke of how Soldiers would be shaped by their upcoming deployment.

“Some Soldiers in this formation will find this deployment to be the pinnacle of their military careers, regardless if their career is six years or spans multiple decades,” Weyer said. “Soldiers will also come home with an appreciation for their new family, the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade family. Lifelong friendships will be woven on a different continent that can stand the test of time, and will stand the test of time.”

Weyer said Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers will work in an environment that includes not only personnel from other U.S. military branches, but service members from partner nations. They will also gain a better understanding of the cultures and complexities inherent to afflicted regions of the world.

“The opportunity to work within such a diverse environment is invaluable, and we will be a better-rounded organization because of it,” Weyer said. “I look forward to the days when we will return your Soldiers home to their families and friends. Until

then, we remember our heritage, cultivate our culture and prepare to make history.”

Leckel quoted U.S. Olympic hockey coach Herb Brooks, who led an amateur U.S. hockey team to victory against the Soviet Union in the 1980 winter Olympics.

“Great moments are born out of great opportunity,” Leckel said, citing Brooks’ quote. “And that’s what we have here tonight. I believe this is our great opportunity, and I cannot wait to see what each and every member of the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade is going to accomplish throughout the next 10 months.”