

WI National Guard: Wisconsin Guard Soldiers plunge into Fox River to hone survival, rescue skills

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OSHKOSH, Wis. — A day of unique combat water survival and swift water rescue training was conducted in the waters of the Fox River in Oshkosh, Wis., by the Soldiers of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team on Sept. 10. This rigorous day of training was designed to prepare the Soldiers of Company A to answer the call to aid in domestic operations whenever needed. The event is the company's first large-scale home station training with all Soldiers back together after many deployments and state missions over the past few years.

The training was two-fold. Soldiers learned how to transport, carry, launch, load and paddle a Zodiac watercraft, as well as right a capsized Zodiac. They also trained to rescue people at risk of drowning in a debris field in swift-moving water. Soldiers had to identify and treat the victim's injuries as part of the water rescue training event.

Additionally, Soldiers performed combat water survival training by treading water in full uniform, including combat boots, for five minutes, swimming 25 meters in full uniform and with a rifle, and both expected and unexpected water entry. Sgt. 1st Class Charles Hensen, readiness noncommissioned officer and platoon sergeant with Company A, explained the importance of conducting these kinds of training events. "It is great to get back into the community where the National Guard belongs," Hensen said, "and to be hosting a domestic operations training event that prepares the Soldiers to use the equipment they could be using in a natural disaster so that we can remain true to our mission to serve our neighbors and the people of Wisconsin."

Spc. Shane Kieslich, a Soldier with Company A who received a challenge coin from Brig. Gen. Matthew Strub, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army, for his efforts during the training, was excited to participate in the training event. "Command has been trying to switch things up and get us training we haven't done before," Kieslich explained. "I'm not the best swimmer so it was a little bit of a struggle, but I thought it was great and I think it really boosts the morale of the Soldiers in the unit." Command Sgt. Maj. Georgett Hall, senior enlisted advisor to Wisconsin's adjutant general, shared that sentiment while reflecting on why these kinds of unique events are important for Soldiers to participate in. "They've trained hard all year, their op-tempo has been through the roof," Hall observed. "Not only is this great training for their mission, but it's also great for morale and retaining Soldiers because there are not a lot of units in the state doing events like this."

Heidi Supple, one of the owners and founders of Fox River Brewing Company, explained why supporting a training event like this was so important to them. "We have a history of flooding in Oshkosh, and it helps the community to realize that this is part of the military's job too," Supple said. "It's not just being overseas fighting a war, it's also coming in and protecting us in a natural disaster and helping out the community, and I think that's a really important thing that we as a community tend to forget, and this is a great way to remind them of that." Strub described this event as about overcoming adversity, overcoming fear, and forming a stronger bond as a unit. "Having competition and building that camaraderie in small teams helps a team to gel and work together," Strub said, "and then no matter what task they are given in the future they are able to attack it that much better." Hensen was integral in coming up with the idea for this training event and coordinating efforts to make it happen. He emphasized his gratitude for all of the organizations involved. "We not only had support from our staff at the company and battalion, but also had the city of Oshkosh, the police, fire, and parks and recreation departments, the Fox River Brewing Company and the Supple Group who hosted us, the Winnebago County Sheriff, the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh ROTC, and the VFW who provided a grant to support family members joining us for the meal," Hensen said. "This event could not have happened without all of these organizations coming together."

Staff Sgt. Alice Ripberger contributed to this story.