

Wisconsin National Guard: Conducts cold weather sustainment at Michigan's Winter Strike

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GRAYLING, Michigan – The maintenance bay, completely blanketed by overnight snowfall, buzzed with activity. The sound of motors idling and voices lifted in communication, could be heard as Soldiers outside crunched through six inches of fresh snow.

The temperature was 16 degrees Fahrenheit and thick flakes made visibility difficult. Inside the bay, however, coffee was brewing and heaters made life more bearable.

Members of Foxtrot Company, 132nd Forward Support Company (F Co, 132nd FSC), currently attached to the 120th Field Artillery Regiment, based in Mosinee, Wisconsin, conducted maintenance operations in anticipation of live fire exercises in the coming days.

The training at Northern Strike 22-1, dubbed Winter Strike, is a National Guard Bureau-sponsored exercise uniting service members from several U.S. states and partner forces from January 21-30, 2022, at Camp Grayling Maneuver Training Center and Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Mich., which together comprise the National All-Domain Warfighting Center (NADWC).

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Josh Pusel, the maintenance control NCOIC for F Co, 132nd FSC explained how vehicle and equipment maintenance will be crucial for a successful exercise.

“During this training, we’ll service and maintain Humvees, Light Medium Tactical

Vehicles (LMTVs), Heavy Expanded Mobility Tactical Trucks (HEMTTs), as well as some trailers and dump trucks,” Pusel said.

The unit also utilizes generators and a few weapon systems supplied by the Michigan National Guard. Thus far, they have requested and received 14 Humvees and numerous parts. Throughout the week, they expect to make additional requests as necessary, all in order to sustain operations.

This equipment, including the dump trucks and other engineering equipment, will be utilized for follow-on units to conduct route clearing and dig fortified positions for simulated defense operations during the exercise.

F Co, 132nd FSC First Sgt. McKenna Palkowski talked about the importance of working with the Michigan National Guard.

“We have been working with Michigan’s Maneuver Area Training Equipment Site (MATES),” Palkowski said. “We have been able to establish a good relationship and have been able to get parts in order to get our equipment back up and running.”

She added, “Due to transportation difficulties, it was more beneficial to utilize some equipment already on site, and Michigan was able to fulfill our deficiencies on equipment.”

The unit will continue to work with MATES for parts and equipment needs, especially because there is always a certain percentage of breakdowns. This is especially true during the winter, under extreme cold weather conditions.

Pusel added, “Prior to utilizing any vehicles or equipment, we always conduct preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS). It’s even more important in the cold because things break down quicker and more often. Fluids are thicker and air is more condensed. Fluid doesn’t get where it needs to go as fast, and this can cause lines to break.”

Even when equipment is functioning properly, the cold weather can have a significant impact when planning operations. Units train under these extreme conditions in order to establish best practices.

Capt. Matthew Cornette, company commander of F Co, 132nd FSC, shared how the cold temperatures make it difficult to predict fuel consumption. “As the weather gets colder, we need to run our equipment overnight and let it idle. We’ve rarely

experienced this kind of challenge before,” he said.

Cornette is a police officer for the city of Wisconsin Rapids. He has been in the Wisconsin National Guard since 2004, serving as the unit’s commander since January 2020. He deployed to Iraq in 2010-2011 during the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“While we’re here, First Army will be evaluating me and my team,” Cornette explained. “They will identify any deficiencies and assist us with making improvements.”

These observer-controller-trainers (OCTs) consist mostly of current and former service members who work with multiple units all over the country to evaluate performance during exercises. They will shadow Cornette and other members of his unit, continually providing feedback to improve processes.

The FSC will be graded on a wide variety of maintenance standards as well as other items such as communication during Winter Strike.

Cornette explained that after this initial PMCS, about half the unit will transition into recovery operations and another portion will conduct support operations for base defense at one of the field artillery firing points on base.

During this part of the exercise, the FSC will operate for 48 hours straight, day and night to sustain vehicles and equipment, as well as simulated defensive support.

“We came out here to hit all the items for our unit’s Mission Essential Task Lists METL,” shared Cornette. “We could definitely do this training during a warmer part of the year. But Winter Strike will provide us a great challenge under less-than-optimal weather conditions. It adds another factor of difficulty for us.”

Winter Strike participants enhance their arctic warfare capabilities, so they are better able to support the DoD’s arctic strategy. As host, NADWC provides a wide range of tailorable, scalable and cost-effective ways to accommodate visiting units.

Even before the Wisconsin Guard arrived at Camp Grayling, the working relationship with Michigan was on full display.

“Our unit’s convoy entered Michigan through Gladstone and they were nice enough to let us stay the night at their armory,” Cornette said. “Granted, there were a

bunch of us and we slept on cots on the drill floor. But the hospitality was nice, and the food served there was probably one of the best catered meals we've had. They were fantastic to work with."

Gladstone, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, marks the halfway point between Mosinee and Camp Grayling, lessening the burden of a seven-hour convoy and ensuring the safety of drivers.

Cornette added, "It's my first time out here at Camp Grayling. It's been great so far. We work closely with MATES and enjoy the relationship with the Michigan National Guard."