

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin guard soldiers conduct fire missions in freezing cold

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CAMP GRAYLING, Mich. — At least one Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldier is a fan of the winter weather at Northern Strike, the country's largest National Guard Bureau-sponsored military exercise.

"I like Michigan a lot," said 1st Lt. Andrew Henderson, a fire support officer with the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry Regiment. "Being from Wisconsin, I am more inclined to the northern weather. I enjoy training up here rather than the warmer climate."

And the cold weather is the point. This iteration of Northern Strike 23-1 — the exercise is conducted in both winter and summer at Northern Michigan's National All-Domain Warfighting Center — is intended to test participants' ability to operate in frigid conditions.

"The cold weather and extreme conditions here in northern mainland Michigan provide an austere environment to test the rigors of our systems," Henderson said. "It meets the Department of Defense's arctic strategy in being prepared for colder environments."

That new strategy, released last October, anticipates environmental transformation due to polar icecap melting, and emphasizes readiness to deter increased Russian and Chinese activity in the arctic region as a result.

According to Maj. Gen. Paul Rogers, Michigan's adjutant general, the temperatures at Camp Grayling have dipped below those in Alaska in past years.

"Wind, snow and single-digit temperatures force units to adapt and overcome

conditions they could potentially face against a near-peer threat,” Rogers said. “This exercise serves as one of the best opportunities for units to train in some of the most challenging conditions they could ever face.”

Northern Strike ran from Jan. 20-29 this year, and included National Guard units from Alabama, Michigan, New York and Wisconsin — the entire 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery participated in this exercise, along with Company F, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion and 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team fire support members — as well as active duty units such as the U.S. Marines Fighter Squadron 115 from South Carolina and the U.S. Air Force 69th Bomb Squadron from North Dakota. Representatives from the Latvian National Armed Forces also took part in Northern Strike 23-1.

This is the 120th Field Artillery’s fourth year at Northern Strike. In 2020 the battalion sent a firing platoon with a squad of forward supporters — troops who provide mission support to artillery crews in the field. In 2021 the battalion sent a firing battery plus a platoon-sized element of forward supporters. Last year Battery C, Headquarters Battery, Company F and a platoon of forward supporters took part in Northern Strike. This year the entire field artillery battalion and accompanying support attended.

“The biggest difference was the logistics of moving the entire battalion that distance with limited wrecker support for vehicle breakdowns,” said Lt. Col. Nathan Bennington, battalion commander. “Our forward support company had to get creative on how to recover vehicles and move them to a location where they could be repaired.

“This event taught us how our equipment operates in a cold-weather environment against a near-peer threat,” Bennington continued. “We gained a lot of lessons through it, and have developed a training plan to overcome these deficiencies.”

Past Northern Strike experiences helped prepare the 120th for this year’s exercise. Replacement windshields were brought with the battalion to replace those that would crack in the cold weather, and older communication cables were replaced prior to arriving at Camp Grayling, as the older cables became brittle and broke in the cold weather.

Bennington said his battalion addressed communication problems with air assets from last year.

“We didn’t have all our required equipment,” he explained. “This year we were able to acquire all the proper equipment and had multiple iterations of training that proved to be effective.”

The opportunity to coordinate artillery and aircraft while using live ammunition is rare, Henderson said, particularly in this kind of climate.

“To be able to do that in real time is a tremendous training opportunity,” Henderson said. “It’s fast-paced, it keeps us busy. We like the multi-faceted opportunities with the different missions we’re supporting.”

Bennington said Northern Strike helped his battalion regain skills that had not been utilized while the military emphasized counter-insurgency tactics.

“Fire planning and synchronization is an art and science,” Bennington said. “This event forced Soldiers to plan constantly, building their confidence in skills supporting the maneuver commander” — the officer responsible for integrating fire support and troop and equipment movement schemes to ensure military operations succeed.

The battalion also met a training requirement by having its howitzers airlifted — slingloaded and transported by helicopter.

“This exercised our air assault-qualified Soldiers and forced the staff to plan how to protect these air assets while in flight,” Bennington said. “Our battalion fire direction center and brigade fires were able to conduct the event together to build that communication link before [scheduled training at the] Joint Readiness Training Center. They had to learn to deconflict air space while supporting the maneuver command with responsive field artillery fires.”

He added that the battalion learned to adapt as conditions affected communications and observation. The snow-covered fields made it difficult for forward observers to accurately see where artillery rounds landed in the impact zone, so radar was used to determine firing coordinate corrections.

Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin’s adjutant general, led a group of Wisconsin National Guard leaders to visit Northern Strike Jan. 25. He said he always appreciates the opportunity to see Wisconsin National Guard troops demonstrating their proficiency at their federal mission.

"I'm just so impressed with the manner in which these Soldiers conducted themselves," Knapp said. "Not just how well they did their jobs, but their overall attitudes during uncomfortable conditions."

"What a great opportunity to see our Soldiers in action," said Brig. Gen. Matthew Strub, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army. The leadership group observed Battery C conduct fire missions during the exercise.

"The professionalism and technical skill that Charlie Battery displayed was exceptional," Strub continued. "We saw noncommissioned officers providing direction and mentoring their teams."

Command Sgt. Maj. Curtis Patrouille, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's senior enlisted leader, said he also saw leadership on display, with senior leaders ensuring safety and proficiency on the firing line, and junior noncommissioned officers and lower enlisted being allowed to step up and assume responsibilities above their pay grade.

"I talk often about seeking authentic leadership opportunities," Patrouille said, "and that is exactly what the Soldiers of the 120th and Company F were doing."

Both Strub and Patrouille said Northern Strike is a challenging training opportunity.

"The Northern Strike exercise provides a level of realism and stress to our Soldiers that can't be produced locally," Strub said. "Through this rigorous training, our Soldiers are better prepared to execute their mission when called upon."

Patrouille agreed.

"Even though we are from Wisconsin and are familiar with the harsh winter environment, Northern Strike pushes our units to their limits in an environment we typically don't train in," he said, adding that such training is relevant in the Army's future force design, which includes arctic settings.

"Despite the harsh conditions and long training days, a high level of morale was felt throughout the visit," Patrouille continued. "Soldiers at all levels were enthusiastic about engaging with senior leadership, explaining their federal mission and even walking us through the fire mission process from start to finish."

Strub noticed this as well.

“I was very impressed with the high morale and comradery displayed by our Soldiers,” Strub said. “They are training in a very challenging environment that requires them to persevere through adversity. They are excelling in that tough environment.”

The exercise included engagements with “opposing forces,” or OPFOR. For example, members of the 120th Field Artillery were ambushed on a military road while hauling towed artillery pieces.

“The point of OPFOR is to give you a realistic training event so that the unit can build readiness,” said Sgt. 1st Class Todd Teuling, manager of the exercise’s OPFOR team. “The big thing is the element of surprise, because they don’t know it’s coming.”

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Troy Bittner, the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s command chief warrant officer, observed a base defense scenario during the leadership visit.

“Every Soldier was focused and completely engaged in a very challenging environment,” Bittner said.

“You don’t get to pick the enemy, the location or the weather when it’s time to fight,” said Maj. Rustin Billings, 120th Field Artillery fire support officer, “so you have to train in all conditions. A lot of the Soldiers build that character piece when it’s a natural thing you have to overcome — it’s not artificial.”

Bennington said his battalion practiced moving as a convoy through an urban environment for the first time, and had to cope with blocked and unblocked ambushes where maneuverability was an issue.

“It taught our Soldiers to think outside the box on how to deal with this threat,” Bennington said.

He said the exercise also emphasized the importance of sweeping a fire position before it is occupied by howitzers, as OPFOR had used notional landmines throughout Northern Strike.

Bittner presented a safety coin to an artillery section chief who paused a live fire mission to tighten a loose fuse on an artillery round. The section chief is responsible for verifying the firing coordinates, cannon aim and disposition, propellant, projectile and fuse.

“His actions may have prevented an accident,” Bittner said, and underscored the professionalism of the Soldiers he observed.

“From E-2 [private] to O-5 [lieutenant colonel], every Soldier that I spoke with knew their role and was fully engaged in the exercise,” Bittner said.

Bennington said platoon certification was achieved against a dynamic and complex threat from both ground and air.

“This made Soldiers have to deal with a multitude of issues at the same time, making them perform in a high-stress environment,” the battalion commander said — a training victory.

Capt. Andrew Lyton and Staff Sgt. Tristan Viglianco contributed to this article.