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## **TN National Guard Maintains Readiness in COVID Environment**

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** – During the last few months, the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges while conducting safe and realistic training for Soldiers and Airmen. The difficulties were overcome through determination and creative thinking as members of the Tennessee National Guard continued to ensure they are ready to support any contingency or deployment around the world.

In July, August and September, units across the state conducted their yearly Annual Training to ensure they maintain their readiness and have properly trained and equipped units, available to rapidly mobilize for war, national emergency, or as otherwise needed. Guardsmen trained throughout the summer and continued to master skills necessary to defend the United States and keep our citizens safe, all during a pandemic.

Starting in July, various units with Knoxville's 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment rotated to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and Tennessee's Volunteer Training Site in Tullahoma. Soldiers kept multiple protective measures in place to ensure everyone stayed safe while performing tank gunnery, weapons qualification, and a myriad of other combat related tasks.

"I'm extremely proud of the tremendous effort our troopers took to not only sustain, but to build readiness while mitigating risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus," said Col. Brad Bowlin, commander of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment. "Our adversaries will not wait for a vaccine to be created or the pandemic to simply pass."

Because the Soldiers were often in close proximity, each unit was required to provide and implement a plan to minimize transmission of the virus. During the summer heat and humidity, Soldiers social distanced and wore face masks at all briefings, classes, and meetings. They maintained six-feet of separation and wore masks whenever possible; systematically sanitizing equipment, modifying routines, and enhancing sanitation procedures.

"We must be adaptable and flexible in creating new ways to build readiness in this unique and challenging environment," said Bowlin. "Our readiness is essential to deterrence...our country is depending on us."

As the pandemic grew back in April, units were initially directed to focus on individual training which greatly limited their contact with one another.

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## **Guard Maintains Readiness**

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“We originally had to shift our training plans for the sake of protecting the force from the virus,” said Maj. Gen. Jeff Holmes, Tennessee’s Adjutant General. “But we knew we had to quickly get back to group training to fulfill our obligations of providing trained and ready forces for either a state or federal mission.”

The Tennessee National Guard has successfully been conducting Annual Training, regularly scheduled drills, and fulfilling deployments overseas and nationally. There are currently three units deployed, with others scheduled to leave on overseas deployments in the next few months. There are also Tennessee Guardsmen currently stationed in Bulgaria, the Middle East, and along the U.S. southwest border. Jackson’s 194th Engineer Brigade just returned from a 10-month deployment to Kuwait on September 17 and Dyersburg’s 168th Military Police Battalion is currently finishing an Iraq deployment.

“We have continued our scheduled deployments throughout the past five months and the pandemic has had no impact on our future missions,” said Holmes.

Currently, 1st Battalion, 181st Field Artillery Regiment in Chattanooga is performing Annual Training in preparation for a deployment to the Middle East next year. The Tennessee Soldiers are firing High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems at Fort McClellan’s Pelham Range in Alabama, all while in a COVID-19 environment.

Adding to the deployments, the Tennessee National Guard, along with medical personnel from the State Guard, have been supporting numerous missions in Tennessee since March. They supported the tornado response in Middle Tennessee, established COVID-19 testing sites, and supported Tennessee’s Department of Health in various projects to help the state fight against COVID-19. At its highest point, the Tennessee Guard had over 1,000 Soldiers and Airmen providing support across the state.

“I’m very proud of the challenges our Soldiers and Airmen have overcome,” said Holmes. “During these past few months, they have persevered to ensure that our units and formations are trained and ready for our federal mission.”

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Tank crews assigned to the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment fires the main cannon of an M1 Abrams tank during tank gunnery at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. (Photo by Sgt. Art Guzman)



Maj. Gen. Jeff Holmes, Tennessee's Adjutant General, receives an operations briefing from Maj. Brian Tomberlin, the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment's Operations Officer, at the 278th's Command Post during Annual Training at Tullahoma's Volunteer Training Site on Aug. 16. (Photo by Sgt. Art Guzman)

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